



Farmers' Distress in Cauvery Delta Region of Tamil Nadu - An Analysis

Vignesh Kumar, S.¹ and Karthikeyan, C.²

¹Department of Agricultural Extension and Rural Sociology,

²Directorate of Extension Education,

Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Coimbatore - 641 003.

Persistent monsoon failure for the past three years has led to distress condition widely prevalent among the farming community in our country. Tamil Nadu in specific, faced crop failures all over the state with the Cauvery Delta region worst hit. For the first time, the state witnessed a total of 89 farmer deaths including 32 farmers who killed themselves. Hence there was a pressing need to take up this study on distress among farmers so as to address their problems in future. The total number of farmer's deaths and suicides reported officially were 19 and two respectively in Nagapattinam district. In the case of Thiruvavur district it was 18 deaths and three suicides respectively. The respondents were selected by following saturated sampling procedure. Accordingly, all the 37 families of the deceased farmers were selected as respondents for the study. Most of the farmers were male and found to be old aged. Nearly half of them had primary education alone, while more than half of the farmers had Agriculture as the only occupation. Nearly two- third of the farmers belonged to the backward communities, whereas their social participation was low in this case. More than half of the farmers were introvert, which might have contributed to the distress condition. One-fourth of the deceased farmers were marginal farmers. Most of the farmers were indebted to a greater extent under both institutional and private sources. This paper discusses in detail about the socio economic profile of farmers who died out of distress situation.

Key words: Socio-Economic profile, Farmers' distress, Cauvery delta zone, Tamil Nadu.

Agriculture in India is like gambling with money. More than the direct clients involved, a large number of external factors exert influence on the farming sector, which makes it highly susceptible to vagaries of nature. Hence the livelihood and lot more are at stake, especially in the Cauvery delta region of Tamil Nadu (Dorairaj, 2012). With continuous monsoon failures for the past three years, the distress condition is widely prevalent among the farming community in our country. Tamil Nadu faced crop failures all over the state with the Cauvery Delta region being the worst hit. Rice being a high water consuming crop, is vastly grown in this region and hence the name " Nerkalanjiyam" (Land of Rice) of Tamil Nadu. The present status of farming in Delta region has forced the farmers to abandon farming in search of alternative employment. This has essentially created a distress condition where farmers are under intense stress to make their livelihood. For the first time, the state witnessed a total of 89 farmer deaths including 32 people who killed themselves (Department of Agriculture, 2017). This had created an alarming situation and unrest among the farming community in the region. Hence, there was a pressing need to take up this study on distress among farmers so as to address their problems in future. Distress, an integral part of the human

existence, is said to have an immense influence over the lives of individuals and the organizations. In the present era, the nature and intensity of distress is so turbulent that the present age has been named as 'Age of Anxiety, Distress and Depression' (Kaur, 2016). Rao and Suri (2006) attribute the agrarian distress in India to: i) a disjuncture between farmers interests and the preferential interests of the political representatives in public works, trade and business and ii) a failure to organize the heterogeneous class of farmers across caste, faction and political lines. This paper deals with the concept of distress, discussed in relation with the socio economic characteristics of farmers in the Delta region.

Material and Methods

The research design adopted for this study is *ex-post-facto* technique, since the phenomenon has already started and is continuing. *Ex-post-facto* research is a systematic empirical enquiry in which the scientist does not have direct control over independent variables because their manifestations have already occurred or because they are inherently not manipulatable. Inferences about relations among variables are made, without direct intervention, from concomitant variation of independent and dependent variables (Kerlinger, 1973).

*Corresponding author's email: vgnshkumar3545@gmail.com

The district wise data on farmers' deaths and suicides in Tamil Nadu during 2016 was collected by seeking the information under RTI act (2005). Accordingly, 13 out of 32 districts in TN had registered farmers' death. Hence, these 13 districts were considered as the population, where Thiruvavur and Nagapattinam recorded the maximum number of farmer deaths and suicides. Considering this data as the criteria, these two districts were selected purposefully for the study. The respondents were selected by following saturated sampling procedure. Accordingly, all the 37 families of the deceased farmers were selected as respondents for the study. The total number of farmer's deaths and suicides reported officially were 19 and two respectively in Nagapattinam district. In the case of Thiruvavur district it was 18 deaths and three suicides respectively. Case studies were performed on five farmers who committed suicide. A well-structured interview schedule was prepared and used as a tool for investigation. The variables were chosen based on review of past literature and identifying research gaps. The farm families of the deceased farmers were investigated for this purpose. Statistical tools like percentage analysis and cumulative frequency method were used to analyze the data collected.

Results and Discussion

Social profile

The social characteristics of the deceased farmers were studied, as it would serve as a base for clear and thorough understanding about the concept of farmer distress. These variables depict how the farmers were oriented towards the society and their contribution as the member of the society. The data regarding the social characteristics of the respondents were categorized using percentage analysis and the results are presented in the Table 1.

From the Table 1, it is evident that more than four-fifth (81.10 %) of the deceased farmers were old aged. 13.50 percent of them belonged to the middle aged category and only 5.40 per cent of the deceased farmers were found to be young. It was revealed that 91.90 per cent of the deceased farmers were male, whereas only 8.10 per cent were Female. This clearly shows the patriarchal nature of agriculture where in men were involved in performing agricultural operations in farm. Very few women farmers take up agriculture in a full-fledged manner. Not many lands are owned by women themselves, which make the case more complicate. This takes distress and suicides out of contention from women farmers, who were meager in number. This research study indicates that more than one-third (40.50 %) of the deceased farmers were educated up to primary level whereas 29.70 per cent of farmers were illiterates. About one-fourth (24.30 %) of them had secondary level education while only 5.40 per cent of the deceased farmers had education beyond schooling. Majority of the farmers being old-aged, their exposure to education can be understood by the fact

that very few opportunities for secondary schooling and colleges existed those days. Considering their farm experience, it could be understood that most of them were pushed into farming and agricultural labour in their childhood, disrupting their education.

Table 1. Social profile of the deceased farmers n= 37

Category	Number	Percentage
Age		
Young	2	5.40
Middle	5	13.50
Old	30	81.10
Total	37	100.00
Category		
Gender		
Male	34	91.90
Female	3	8.10
Total	37	100.00
Educational Status		
Illiterate	11	29.70
Primary	15	40.50
Secondary	9	24.30
Collegiate	2	5.40
Total	37	100.00
Occupational Status		
Agriculture as the only occupation	19	51.40
Agriculture + Labour	8	21.60
Agriculture + Livestock	6	16.20
Agriculture + Salt Pan	1	2.70
Agriculture + other services	3	8.10
Total	37	100.00
Family type		
Nuclear	32	86.50
Joint	5	13.50
Total	37	100.00
Family Size		
1-2	4	10.81
3-4	27	72.97
5-6	6	16.21
Total	37	100.00
Social Status		
SC	14	37.84
BC	23	62.16
General	0	0.00
Total	37	100.00
Farm Diversification		
Diversified	13	35.14
Not diversified	24	64.86
Total	37	100.00
Extent of Farm Diversification		
Crop alone	24	64.86
Crop + Dairy	8	21.62
Crop + Dairy + Goat	4	10.81
Crop + Salt Pan	1	2.70
Total	37	100.00
Social Participation		
Membership		
Member	18	48.65
Non member	19	51.35
Total	37	100.00
Category		
Extent of Participation		
Regularly	4	10.81
Occasionally	12	32.43
Never	21	56.76
Total	37	100.00
Personality type		
Introvert	19	51.40
Extrovert	8	21.60
Ambivert	10	27.00
Total	37	100.00

From this study, it is clearly evident that more than half (51.40 %) of the deceased farmers were having agriculture as the only occupation and no other alternative sources of income. Little more than one-fifth (21.60 %) of them worked as a farm labourer in addition to agriculture. So these two cases present the fact that nearly three-fourths of the deceased farmers completely relied on agriculture for their income. Livestock was maintained by 16.20 per cent in addition to cropping. Saltpan, considered as an allied activity of agriculture was run by 2.70 per cent of the deceased farmers, whereas 8.10 per cent of them were involved in other service related activities like carpentry, business in addition to agriculture. It could also be interpreted that majority (86.50 %) of the deceased farmers belonged to the nuclear family system whereas only 13.50 per cent of them were a part of joint family system. This finding can be understood in two different ways. Joint families can provide financial and social security to the farmer even if he had faced a failure on when he is under distress, whereas Nuclear family type won't provide that security. Similarly when a family is reliant on the particular farmer alone, joint families can prove lethal as it puts heavy financial and social pressure on the farmer, pushing him into distress condition.

The findings indicate that more than three-fifths (62.16 %) of the deceased farmers belonged to the backward communities while, more than one-third (37.84 %) of the farmers belonged to scheduled castes. The reason for this may be attributed to land distribution among the castes, where backward communities are known to hold most of the lands and traditionally being farmers. Hence the casualties among farmers are naturally high among them. Regarding farm diversification, it is known from the study that a little more than one-third (35.14 %) of the farmers had diversified their land whereas a little lesser than two-thirds (64.86 %) of them were not diversified, as they cultivated crops alone. Out of the those farmers who had diversified their farm, a little more than one-fifth (21.62 %) possessed crop + diary whereas, a little more than one-tenth of them had crop + diary + goat. Only one farmer had saltpan in addition to cropping. Diversification of farm provides financial security to the farmer as they can get returns even if the major crop fails. Failure of the sole crop among non-diversified farmers created a financial crisis situation, which might have lead to distress condition.

The study could be interpreted that a little less than half (48.65 %) of the farmers were holding membership in at least one social organization, whereas a little more than half (51.35 %) of them weren't a part of any social organization. Though being the members, more than half (56.76 %) of them never participated in those social organizations. Little lesser than one-third (32.43%) of them had participated rarely whereas only four farmers had frequent participation in social organizations. It was also revealed that little more than half (51.40 %) of the deceased farmers were

found to be introvert, which may present a strong case for distress condition of farmers. Lack of psychological awareness among farmers and social pressure had contributed to this fact. More than one-fifth (21.60 %) of the farmers were found to be extrovert in nature, whereas more than one-fourth of the deceased farmers were ambivert in nature.

Economic profile

The economic characteristics of the farmers are directly related to their well being, as the ultimate objective of any agricultural activity will be the profit. Hence, the following variables were studied among the deceased farm families in order to measure the economical aspects of distress.

Table 2. Economic profile of the deceased farmers n= 37

Category	Number	Percentage
Farm Size		
Marginal	28	75.68
Small	7	18.92
Big	2	5.40
Total	37	100.00
Family Annual Income		
40000-139999	24	64.87
140000-239999	10	27.03
240000-339999	3	8.10
Total	37	100.00
Irrigation Status		
River	33	89.19
No source	4	10.81
Total	37	100.00
Insurance		
Awareness		
Aware	31	83.80
Not aware	6	16.20
Total	37	100.00
Availed or Not		
Availed	19	51.40
Not availed	18	48.60
Total	37	100.00
Received or not		
Received	16	43.20
Not received	21	56.80
Total	37	100.00
Indebtedness		
Indebted	35	94.59
Non indebted	2	5.41
Total	37	100.00
Category	Number	Percentage
Level of Indebtedness		
15000-214999	27	77.14
215000-414999	5	14.29
415000-614999	2	5.71
615000-814999	1	2.86
Total	37	100.00

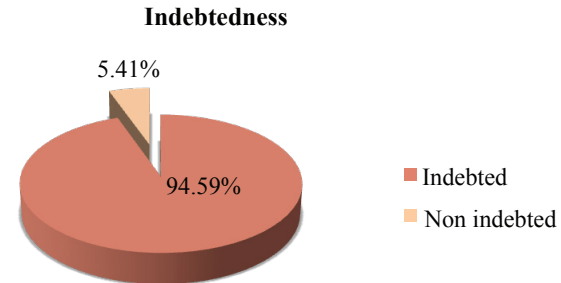
It could be known from Table 2 that three-fourths (75.68 %) of the deceased farmers were marginal farmers. This implies that there is little chance for diversifying income by accommodating a variety of crops. Also lesser cultivable area doesn't allow the farmer to be innovative as it lacks trial ability. Less than one-fifth of the farmers (18.92 %) were small farmers whereas only 5.40 per cent of them owned lands more than five acre. It could be witnessed that

improper land distribution among farmers happened in the past and still many lands were under the control of temples surrounding the area. These lands were leased out to the landless and marginal farmers for cultivation. Hence, this also remains a burden for farmers, as they have to pay the lease amount irrespective of the returns they get in farming.

This study also reveals that during 2016, nearly two-thirds (64.87 %) of the farm families had low level of income ranging from 40,000 to 1,39,999. This can be attributed to the gradual deterioration of farming based income over the years and failure of crops during the year 2016. Also most of them were involved in agriculture alone, which prevents earning of income from diverse sources. More than one-fourth (27.03 %) of the families had medium level of income ranging from 1,40,000-2,39,999. Only 8.10 per cent of the farm families had high level of income ranging from 2,40,000-3,39,999 since they had credible sources of income other than agriculture. Regarding irrigation facilities, the entire Delta region is irrigated by the Cauvery river and hence most (89.19 %) of the deceased farmers had access to irrigation. No tube wells were available among the farmers as their feasibility was low and water was saltier. Also it piled up the financial burden on farmer since they go dry often. Four farmers had no other sources of irrigation as they lie in the off-regions of the district (Vedharanyam) where the river or Canal irrigation is not available. They cultivated rice, only if they received sufficient rainfall. The above finding implies the over dependence of farmers over the river water and subsequent crop failure if monsoon failed. Further, it was found that majority (83.80 %) of the deceased farmers were aware of the insurance facilities available to them, whereas only one-sixth (16.20 %) of the them weren't aware about it. Though the awareness level is more, only half (51.40 %) of the farmers had availed crop insurance scheme and paid the premium amount. This can be attributed to the fact that insurance was denied in past years citing leased out lands. Hence, many leased out farmers were reluctant to avail the insurance facility. Totally more than two-fifth (43.20 %) of the farmers received the insurance claim, whereas more than half (56.80%) of the farmers didn't receive. It is also evident that a little less than one-sixth (15.79 %) of the farmers who had availed insurance, didn't receive their claim. Operational reasons and improper damage assessment in the field led to the rejection of farmers from claiming their amount.

Indebtedness is a major factor concerning distress condition among farmers as they cause financial stress and loss of social status in some cases. It was found that most of the farmers (94.59 %) were indebted whereas, only 5.41 per cent of the deceased farmers didn't avail credit. More than three-fourths (77.14 %) of the deceased farmers had availed credit ranging from Rs. 15,000 to Rs. 2,14,999. This created heavy financial burden to farmers, which in turn

elevated the stress condition. Low repayment capacity was quoted by many of the farm families, as they had no alternative sources of income to neutralize the loss created by crop failure. Less than one-sixth (14.29 %) of the farmers had availed credit in the range of Rs. 2,15,000 to Rs. 4,14,999.



Also it could be inferred that nearly half of the farmers (45.94 %) availed credit from both institutional and private sources. It implies the insufficiency of credit availability from institutional sources.

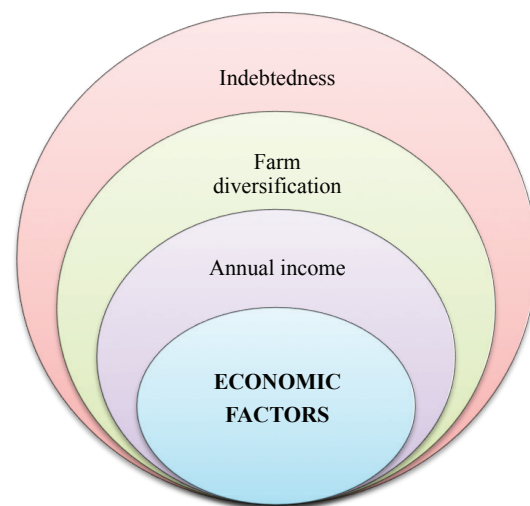


Fig. 1. Economic factors dominating the distress situation

More than one-third (35.15 %) of the deceased farmers had availed credit from private sources alone, whereas only 13.51 per cent farmers had availed institutional credit alone. This indicates the difficulty to access institutional sources for credit among farmers. Average credit accessed by a farmer amounted to Rs. 1,49,378. These findings are in accordance with Jagannath (2011).

Conclusion

Considering all the above interpretations, it could be inferred that the social and economic characteristics of the deceased farmers played a major role in elevating the distress condition among them. To be specific, the economic characteristics are important in deciding the social and psychological well being of the farmers. The fact that most of the farmers (95.59 %) were indebted reflects the pathetic situation of the financial stress among them. Non-availability

of institutional credit had aggregated the issue, since farmers were forced to depend on private moneylenders who charged higher rate of interest. This created both economic and social pressure to repay the loan irrespective of the returns they got. Though most of the farmers were aware of Insurance claims, only half of them availed it while even a lesser number of them got their claims. Issues regarding land ownership and lease agreements were the other major reasons for less number of people availing it. Regarding the social characteristics, personality of the deceased farmer matters. More than half of the farmers were found to be introvert, which implies the psychological instability, in turn elevating the distress situation. Likewise farm size, social status, farm diversification and social participation also played a considerable role in distress situation of the farmers. Strengthening of institutional credit sources should be done at ground level so as to make sure that financial help reaches the last needed farmer. Policy changes at higher level are also expected so as to ensure that sufficient credit, inputs, water and useful technical advice are available to all needy farmers. Water management practices with alternative irrigation sources can be brought into action so that availability of water is ensured at right time. Insurance claims and

it's regulations should be made clear among farmers and 100 per cent insurance cover can be encouraged. Introducing more water-saving crops in the area in a way that it diversifies income shall be done as a part of crop diversification. Farmer counseling centers in public-private partnership mode can be promoted in areas where distress situation is more prevalent, so that the psychological well being of the farmers improves a lot.

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