
DISSECTING THE WITHERING FIELDS: A CRITICAL STUDY OF FARMER'S SUICIDE IN ANITA AGNIHOTRI'S *THE SICKLE*.

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Abstract

The current paper undertakes an in-depth examination of the causes behind farmer suicides in India, with a critical analysis elucidating the intricate relationship between economic, social, and environmental factors. Farmers nurture the land with unwavering dedication. They sustain life and ensure that the earth's resources flourish. They are the backbone of not only our food security but also of the Indian economy, with the agriculture sector contributing 17% to the total GDP and providing employment to over 60% of India's population. However, rural India's landscape is confronting an unprecedented crisis sparked by the detrimental effects of climate change. Farmers are quietly dying under the crushing weight of debt, hopelessness, and desperation as the fields wither and dry out. Against this backdrop, Anita Agnihotri's novel *The Sickle* (2019) illuminates the struggles of farmers in rural agrarian landscape. The study seeks to highlight the pressing need for ecological resilience, social justice, and sustainable agricultural practices. This study aims to contribute to advocacy and policy initiatives, igniting a national conversation about the predicament of Indian farmers and the necessity of structural reform.

Keywords: Drought, indebtedness, farmer's suicide, water scarcity, trauma, corruption, and unsustainable agriculture.

1. INTRODUCTION

Whoever could make two ears of corn, or two blades of grass, to grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before, would deserve better of mankind, and do more essential service to his country, than the whole race of politicians put together. (Swift, 1726)

The slogan 'Jai Jawan Jai Kisan' was coined by Lal Bahadur Shastri, the second Prime Minister of Independent India, in 1965. It is a Hindi language slogan which means "Hail the Soldier, Hail the Farmer". It is a tribute to two of the most vital professions of India, namely the soldiers and farmers. It was a rallying call that aimed to evoke pride and reverence for India's brave soldiers and hardworking farmers. This slogan was a clarion call to recognize the paramount importance of both national security and food security. It emerged during a period of great turmoil in India's history, marked by the Indo-Pakistan War and a severe food crisis that necessitated heavy reliance on imports. Shastri's slogan served as a rallying cry to boost morale, promote national unity, and encourage citizens to contribute to the country's development. By acknowledging the selfless service of soldiers who safeguard the nation's borders and farmers who toil to produce food, this slogan has become an enduring symbol of India's appreciation for these two professions. Lal Bahadur Shastri sought to revitalize national sentiments by emphasizing the crucial role that soldiers and farmers play in the survival and prosperity of the nation. The very fabric of our sustenance is inextricably linked to the toil of farmers, who labor tirelessly to provide the world with the substantial proportion of its nutritional requirements. However, Shastri's vision of a self-sufficient India, seems to be fading away, with the harsh reality of farmer suicides casting a shadow over the nation.

Anita Agnihotri in the novel *The Sickle* which was first published in 2019, presents a scathing picture of the agrarian crisis that has plagued rural India, culminating into the disturbing phenomenon of farmer's suicides. While climate variability and debt are often cited as contributing factors to farmer's suicide, the complex mechanism underlying this relationship necessitates further investigation. This knowledge gap is particularly addressed in *The Sickle*. Through the narrative's introspective lens, Agnihotri masterfully excavates the complex, interconnected causes that propel farmers towards suicide. The causes of farmer distress in India are complex and multifaceted, which emphasizes the need for a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to addressing the issue of farmer's suicide, one that takes into account the complex interplay of social, economic, and environmental factors. The farmer's suicides is not just the result of personal despair, but also a symptom of a larger systemic problem. The notion that suicide is a personal issue, a result of individual weakness or mental health struggles, is a pervasive discourse. A decade and a half ago farmer's suicide was considered the farmer's private psychological problem. However, a closer examination of the circumstances surrounding suicide reveals that it is often a social issue, driven by a complex interplay of economic, environmental, and societal factors.

2. SCALE AND SCOPE OF FARMER'S SUICIDE

The prospect of a world devoid of farmers is a dystopian scenario that although seemingly far-fetched is ominously foreshadowed by the National Crime Record Bureau's Statistics, revealing a disturbing trend in farmer suicide. The statistics on farmer suicide are chilling, with over 5,760 suicides occurring annually in India, according to the data of the years 2017 and 2018 (Gruère and Sengupta, 2011, p.316-337). In 2023 alone, at least 10,786 individuals associated with the farming sector died by suicide accounting for 6.3 % of all suicides nationwide. The burden of this tragedy is concentrated in states such as Maharashtra (38.5% of total farm suicides), Karnataka (22.5%), Andhra Pradesh (8.6%), Madhya Pradesh (7.2%), and Tamil Nadu (5.9%) (PTI, 2025). Of the total suicides in the farming sector in 2023, 4690 were by farmers/cultivators themselves and 6096 by agricultural laborers, showing the victims are both landowners and the landless poor (PTI, 2025). Between January and March 2025, Maharashtra reported a suicide every three hours among farmers (Down to Earth, 2025). This shows the sustained intensity of this crisis.

3. HISTORICAL ROOTS

This alarming trend is a manifestation of a larger systemic problem rooted in India's colonial past. The arrival of the British East India Company in India in the 17th century marked the beginning of colonial exploitation, forcing Indian farmers to cultivate cash crops for British interests. This legacy of exploitation continues to haunt Indian farmers, with the Green Revolution's focus on intensive cultivation and chemical inputs creating a cycle of debt and dependence. The Green Revolution was introduced in India in the late 1960s and played a significant role in shaping India's agricultural sector. Lal Bahadur Shastri had raised caution against rushing into the new agriculture. But with his death in 1966 the new strategy was easier to introduce (Shiva, 2021, p. 32). Shiva claims that "Green Revolution was based on the assumption that technology is a superior substitute for nature, and hence a means of producing limitless growth, unconstrained by nature's limits. However, the assumption of nature as a source of scarcity and technology as a source of abundance, leads to the creation of technologies which create new scarcities in nature through ecological destruction. The reduction in availability of fertile land and genetic diversity of crops as a result of the Green Revolution practices indicates that at the ecological level, Green Revolution produced scarcity not abundance" (Shiva, 2021, p.24). Although the Green Revolution was motivated by the famine and droughts in India in the 20th century, but ultimately it was the British East India Company's policies such as forced cash cropping which led to the exploitation of Indian peasants and contributed to the droughts and famine in India. The Bengal famine in 1943, killed an estimated 2.5-3 million people (Portillo, 2008). The company's focus on export-oriented crops like indigo and cotton displaced traditional food crops making the Indian agricultural system unsustainable. Shiva claims, "When the best of western scientists was earlier sent to 'improve' Indian agriculture, they found nothing that could be improved in the principles of farming, which were based on preserving and building on nature's process and nature's patterns. Where Indian agriculture was less productive, it was not due to primitive principles or inferior practices, but due to interruptions in the flow of resources that made productivity possible. Land alienation, the reservation of forests and the expansion of cash crop cultivation were among the many factors introduced during colonialism that created a scarcity of local inputs of water and manure to maintain agricultural productivity" (Shiva, 2021, p. 26). Vandana Shiva in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, entails that the myth of development has been used to justify the destruction of nature and displacement of communities (Shiva, 1988, p.2). The emphasis on profit over people and nature has led to the exploitation of natural resources, displacement of farmers, and degradation of soil quality.

4. ENVIRONMENTAL PRESSURES

The episode of Umesh's suicide in *The Sickie*, unfolds the interconnected factors that contribute to this tragedy, including climate variability, debt traps and unsustainable agriculture. In India, a predominantly agrarian nation, drought assumes a complex dimension affecting over half of the population reliant on agriculture for livelihood. While droughts are the result of natural factors, human activities are equally contributing to intensifying drought situations. Human activities such as poor crop selection, unsustainable agricultural methods, and unbalanced use of ground and stored water, deforestation and industrialization contribute significantly to intensifying drought conditions. It is evident in the novel when narrator says, "one third of the land used to be covered by vegetation but reckless deforestation has reduced this to mere 5 percent" (Agnihotri, 2021, p.16). The "farmer is only concerned with drawing out the ground water, no one is interested in recharging the earth with water" (Agnihotri, 2021, p.16). It suggests how human activities contribute to climate change. Climate change is the pressing issue of our times. The scientific consensus is clear that the relentless pursuit of economic growth, technological advancement and consumption patterns catalysing a storm of greenhouse gas emission. The consequences are poignantly captured in the novel as noted in the novel, the districts prone to drought rose from 66 districts in 5 states in 1996 to 405 districts across 23 states by the beginning of 21st century (Agnihotri, 2021, p.186).

Maharashtra is an enormous state. The region's unique topography exacerbates its climatic woes. Agnihotri mentions that the Marathwada region in Maharashtra, India, is a land beset by geographical and climatic challenges that perpetuate anxiety and distress. Located deep within the vast state of Maharashtra, Marathwada lies in a rain shadow area (Agnihotri, 2021, p.14). In Marathwada, the intersection of geography, climate, and human activity creates a perfect storm of adversity. The novel shows the distress migration of rural laborers from drought-affected Marathwada to the sugarcane fields of Satara (Agnihotri, 2021, p.11). Even the farmers having many acres of land were obliged to work as labor. Driven by poverty, lack of livelihood options, and drought, families like the Terana's migrate seasonally. This migration pattern is ruled by the need for survival, with laborers forced to work long hours in harsh conditions for meagre wages. A man and his wife here add up to a "sickle" are assigned a number and paid an advance for which they toil endlessly in inhuman living conditions (Agnihotri, 2021, p.11). The novel highlights the human cost of environmental degradation. The exploitation of natural resources and human labor is often driven by the logic of capitalism, which prioritizes profit over people and the planet (Roy, 2024). The sugarcane industry's reliance on cheap labor and exploitative practices in the novel resonates with this logic, entrenching the poverty and inequality faced by rural laborers.

In Anita Agnihotri's novel, *The Sickle*, water-scarcity which is precipitated by climate change and unsustainable agriculture, emerges as a pervasive and debilitating theme, exacerbating the struggles of farmers in rural India. The narrative masterfully excavates the far-reaching consequences of water scarcity, from depletion of livelihoods to the erosion of social relationships and the disintegration of community cohesion. Farmers despite having many acres of land in Marathwada opt for migration to work as labour in the sugarcane field, farmers in Vidarbha lean towards cash crops despite erratic rainfall. Farmers like Umesh cultivate cash crops as they bring in more profit as "Jowar and Bajra cannot even recoup their expenses anymore" (Agnihotri, 2021, p.169). The agricultural landscape of Vidarbha is slightly better than Marathwada. Rainfall here is uncertain. Farmers like Umesh gamble with the whims of nature, planting cotton and soybean in the hope of reaping handsome profits. However, the success of their crops hinges precariously on the timely arrival of the monsoon rains. Drought and water scarcity can lead to crop failure, while a good harvest may still fail to cover the exorbitant costs of production. The fragile balance between nature, economics, and human endeavor is evident in the struggles of Vidarbha's farmers. The novel highlights the ways in which water scarcity perpetuates a cycle of poverty, debt, and desperation among farmers. The scarcity of water for irrigation forces farmers to the vagaries of the weather. When the rain fails, crops wither, and farmers are plunged into a crisis of survival. Water scarcity is a pivotal factor contributing to the alarming rate of farmer suicides. Leveraging satellite data, the researchers analyzed trends in groundwater storage, revealing a disturbing association: a decline in groundwater storage was consistently accompanied by a surge in farmer suicides (Chinnasamy et al. 2019). A recent case that starkly embodies this nexus of water scarcity, crop failure, and psychological distress is that of Kailash Arjun Nagare, a 42-year-old farmer from Shivni Aarmal village in Buldhana district, Vidarbha. Despite being honoured with the Maharashtra government's Yuva Shetkari award in 2020, Nagare died by suicide in March 2025 by consuming poison on his six-acre farm, leaving a suicide note that cited lack of irrigation water, crop losses, and mounting debt as the key reasons. Nagare had been demanding irrigation water for 14 villages from Khadakpurna reservoir for many years. "Last year, he had even staged a 10-day hunger strike for his demands. However, the government's inaction left him disheartened". A three-page suicide note found in Nagare's pocket said: "The administration is ignoring farmers' issues. Do not remove my body until our demands are met." (TNN, 2025) His death reveals how even "model" farmers, officially recognised for their productivity, remain acutely vulnerable to the same structural pressures depicted in *The Sickle*, where water misallocation, climatic volatility, and exploitative credit systems converge to push cultivators beyond their psychological limits. The novel shows the dire consequences of drought, where even basic human needs like bathing become a luxury. The image of humans waiting "endlessly to bathe" while animals are relegated to a secondary priority is an illustration of this in the novel. The contractors, who "diverted the water meant for one region to another" and "the greater the paucity, the more the price rose" serves as a scathing indictment of the corruption and commodification of water, where the vulnerable are forced to pay exorbitant prices for a basic necessity. In the novel, "enterprising housewives and their daughters go all the way down", "digging beneath the soil and shift the rocks" in the hope of finding some water, "under the blazing sun" (Agnihotri, 2021, p.187), highlights the disproportionate burden placed on women during crises. Vandana Shiva says that women are often the primary collectors of water and fuel, and are thus most affected by their scarcity as it means longer walk for collecting water and firewood, and a heavier burden" (Shiva 2019).

5. ECONOMIC TRAPS

Another factor contributing to farmer's suicide, underscored in the novel is the crippling debt trap that ensnares farmers, exacerbated by the exploitative mechanisms of moneylenders and inadequacy of institutional credit facilities. The novel highlights how farmers, already reeling under the pressures of climate variability, become entrapped in a vicious cycle of debt, as they struggle to pay exorbitant loans taken from exploitative moneylenders and banks. The institution which is supposed to support farmers actually exploits them. Agnihotri argues that the rate of interest on loans, which a farmer takes to grow crops from local moneylenders, knows no limit; it can run up to 60 percent to even 100 percent. The moneylenders themselves survive on their interest earnings. The interest on their loan keeps growing (Agnihotri, 2021, p.169). The novel highlights the egregious exploitation of farmers by nationalised banks, the judiciary and the government. This Triumvirate of oppression perpetuates a systemic injustice that perpetuates the crisis of farmer's suicide. The Bank has no compassion for or empathy with farmers from regions that neither receive rainfall nor irrigation. The novel critiques the institution of nationalised banks. Nationalised banks in India were established with the primary objective of providing financial assistance to marginalised communities, including farmers. However, stark reality has emerged where the very institutions have become instrumental in exploiting farmers, thereby contributing to the alarming rise in the debt driven suicides. Farmers, who are often at the mercy of unpredictable weather conditions and market fluctuations, are frequently unable to repay their loans on time. This leads to the accumulation of debt, which can become overwhelming and ultimately drive farmers to take their own lives or sell their land.

6. PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL DIMENSIONS

Emile Durkheim, a renowned French sociologist astutely observed that suicide in most cases is not a personal weakness, rather it is a concrete social problem based in levels of social integration. (Durkheim, 1951). In the novel, Ranjan's father had to sell a part of his land to pay the debt. The narrator says, "Whenever an instalment is overdue, the banks dispatch their goons" and threatens the farmers and their families (Agnihotri, 2021, p.169). They use foul language. It is evident when Umesh had used part of his farming loan to extend his house and he had barely managed to cover his cost from the previous year's crop, the goon had begun their visits. The 4 men sent by the bank taunt his wife "her impotent coward of her husband, was using her as a shield; he had turned his house into a palace and now had no interest in repaying his loan" (Agnihotri, 2021, p.170). One of the goons threatens her "If you don't, we will tie your husband with ropes and march him around the neighbourhood" (Agnihotri, 2021, p.170). She went to the bank to understand how much of the loan was still unpaid and how long Umesh had to repay it. The man took her into a room to an officer who was sitting with his arms behind his head. Vaishali realises "where his eyes were roving, she adjusted her saree to cover her breast properly. She heard him say almost without knowing that she did, the words that made her breakout in a sweat, even in the cold room tight body. Why don't you visit me every month? I will waive the interest. Just pay the principal. The goons in black t-shirt commented obscenely, she is the interest, malik, we won't let her be waived" (Agnihotri, 2021, p. 171). It describes the traumatic experience of Vaishali, Umesh's wife who is exploited and humiliated by a bank officer and his goons. Vaishali's emotional response to the traumatic event is intense and overwhelming. She feels a sense of shame and guilt, apparent in her actions- taking a long bath to scrub herself clean and feeling as though "blood is spurting out of her body" (Agnihotri, 2021, p. 171). The bank officer and his goons wield significant power over Vaishali, who is vulnerable and powerless. Her experience underscores what Judith Herman describes as an "affliction of powerlessness" (Herman, 1992, p.33). The novel reflects how Vaishali's humiliation is deeply intertwined with her social and cultural context. Vaishali's experiences are shaped by the patriarchal norms and power dynamics that govern society. The fact that she is a woman in a patriarchal society and that she is a poor farmer's wife makes her more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Similarly, while the principal reason of cotton farmer's suicide which is economic deterioration remains same, the proximate reason for Umesh's suicide is the feeling of shame, guilt and powerlessness that he experienced after learning about the exploitation of his wife. As Herman notes, "At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. When the force is that of nature, we speak of disasters. When the force is that of other human beings, we speak of atrocities. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning (Herman, 1992, p.33). Umesh's sense of masculinity and self-worth is deeply tied to his ability to protect and provide for his family. The exploitation of his wife and his inability to protect her likely triggered a crisis of masculinity leading to feelings of shame and powerlessness. Umesh's suicide can be seen as a symbol of resistance and defiance against the exploitation of his wife and his own feelings of powerlessness.

Umesh's suicide can be understood through the lens of trauma theory which suggests that traumatic experiences can have a profound impact on an individual's mental health and well-being. As Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* notes "traumatic events are extraordinary not because they occur rarely but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life" (Herman, 1992, p.33). When Umesh gets to know about the threatening comments of goons and humiliation of his wife by them, he becomes aggressive. "He just breathed through his mouth without saying a

word, sitting at the door like a statue” and remarked “so you will march me around the village, you bastards, I will show you.” (Agnihotri, 2021, p.172). Umesh’s experiences are compounded by the social and cultural norms that govern society. The patriarchal norms and power dynamics that exist in society perpetuate his trauma, making it difficult for him to express his emotions. It is evident when in Umesh’s action of committing suicide, he did not even share his mind to his wife as Vaishali reflected that “despite her intimacy with her husband, she had not yet fathomed how the mind of a man worked” (Agnihotri, 2021, p.172). While Umesh committed suicide by hanging himself, Keshav killed himself by swallowing pesticides. Studies have shown that committing suicide by swallowing pesticide is very common among farmers because of its availability. Radha’s family despite having 8 acres of land could not eke out a proper living out of it. Keshav committed suicide due to the failure to repay farming loan and her brother-in-law switched to different professions like cloth trading and repairing mobiles. On the other hand, Govind, her father-in-law, cling to farming as he did not know any other profession as his father and forefather were also farmers. He was sixty-five years old but struggling to eke out a living from parched land. As the land was not distributed to Govind’s son officially he was not even provided any benefit from the government. The socioeconomic implications of Radha’s family are far reaching. Agnihotri writes, “If calculations were to be made, 300 to 400 farmers took their own lives every year in each district of Vidarbha. One farmer dies every hour” (Agnihotri, 2021, p.168). There was no doubt that Umesh had died by suicide, but the team of Revenue Officer was investigating whether it could be officially considered a case of ‘farmer suicide’. Agnihotri mentions “If a person kills himself because of illness or depression, or if he has no land of his own, or if there are no documents to prove he was in debt, his suicide does not qualify for government compensation”. This suggests that there might be other cases which remain unreported in the National Crime Bureau Record of farmer suicide. Hence the statistics of farmer suicide could be higher.

The novel also reflects upon the condition of a woman after the death of her husband. The narrator says, “The farmer's wife was neither the owner of the land, nor had its lease” (Agnihotri, 2021, p. 177). This shows the gendered discrimination that women are not given share in the land. While Radha had her father in law to help her, Vaishali finds that although her brother in law, Ramesh had not asked her to contribute to the payments of electricity and the water pump, but he had not given her any money either. “Her blood ran cold sometimes at the thought- it would be expensive to bring up her two children” (Agnihotri, 2021, p.179). Vaishali's condition after her husband's death is one of utter despair and desperation. Physically, Vaishali appears to be malnourished and exhausted. Her "collarbones jutting out, sunken cheeks and dark shadows under her eyes" suggest a lack of proper food and care (Agnihotri, 2021, p.192). Her appearance is likened to "an idol fished out of the river after a ritual immersion," implying a sense of abandonment and neglect (Agnihotri, 2021, p.192). Emotionally, Vaishali is struggling to cope with the loss of her husband and the resulting financial burdens. Vaishali finds it difficult to handle the financial strains that have resulted from her husband's passing. She doesn't have enough money and her kids are still in school. Her decision to get employment despite having no prior experience demonstrates her desperation and her readiness to go to any lengths to support her family. Vaishali appears to have few alternative options and is dependent on the generosity of others to survive, as seen by her visit to Ranjan's family in search of employment and support. This reinforces the idea that she is in a fragile and vulnerable situation. Additionally, the novel suggests that Vaishali's circumstances are not exceptional and that she is a part of a broader social and economic framework that perpetuates inequality and poverty.

Research indicates that families of affected farmers, especially widows and children, experience multi-layered trauma, compounded by economic insecurity and social stigma. In rural communities the cases of farmer’s suicide also leads to the intergenerational impact, which leave psychological scars and reinforce cycles of vulnerability. Every suicide transforms into collective trauma. The suffering of widows of farmers shows the affective dimension of farmer’s suicide which reveals the emotional vulnerability engendered by persistent socioeconomic adversity. ‘We haven't eaten any vegetables for the past two months. We only eat lentils that we produce in our fields,’ says Sangeeta, the widow of Ashok Saatpaise (Asthana, 2016). The only man in the family is Savita's 93-year-old father, who came to live with them after Jitender's suicide. Savita, although independent, still longs for a man for her family to avoid harassment and the stigma a widow faces in her society (Asthana, 2016). The testimony of these widows echoes across countless villages where farming, once a source of pride, is now a battle for survival. In 2022, the Marathwada region saw a severe drought. A cycle of loan and increasing debt put pressure on farmers like Phulabai Pawar’s husband who resort to suicide as a way out of troubles, leaving behind families that have to pick up the pieces. Phulabai Pawar says, ‘I have to leave home and go out to work, where do I keep my children? I hardly manage to provide food everyday. How would I afford the school fees. So, I decided to discontinue their school, and they now accompany me wherever I go’ (Khandare & Pawar, 2024)

7. INSTITUTIONAL FAILURES

The novel entails the failure of judiciary in addressing the underlying cause of Umesh's suicide. The investigation of Umesh's suicide is reduced to a bureaucratic questionnaire, ignoring the emotional and psychological distress he faced due to the exploitation by bank officials. There was no room in the questionnaire for the things how many times Umesh had been to bank in the futile attempt to pay back a smaller amount than the instalment that was due, how many times he had pleaded with them for more time, how the bank officers had snarled at him in response, how the loan recovery goons had taunted him, threatened him and humiliated his wife. The investigation report prioritizes protecting bank and government interests over delivering justice to Umesh and his family as what the bank officer did to Vaishali was a punishable offence. This highlights the judiciary's inadequacy in addressing farmer suicides.

Moreover, the novel provides a critique of the government's apathy in the exploitation of farmers. While it provides compensation for family of farmer-suicide victims and contributes to construction of dams, the underlying corruption exacerbates the crisis. The narrative highlights the ways in which the government policies perpetuate the expectation of farmers by banks and moneylenders, taxes to credit with high interest rates charged by banks have led to debt traps that have led to farmers' suicide. The government's policies, influenced by industrialists and contractors, prioritize the interest of corporations over those of farmers. This bias is exemplified in the novel by the allocation of water resources with industrial parks receiving preferential treatment over irrigation needs. This has led to a precipitous decline in potable water levels, forcing farmers to rely on water extraction and water entrepreneurs who profit from the scarcity. The government's response to the crisis is characterized by a lack of transparency and accountability. The preference for sanctioning water for industrial parks over irrigation needs is an egregious example of this. Furthermore, the government's initiatives to address the crisis, such as construction of small dams and soil preservative projects, are marked by structural flaws and corruption. Ranjan questions, "Why does Marathwada with no irrigation facilities, have to grow so much sugarcane? The government is bound to buy the crop at the price that it has fixed, so the farmer is detrimental to growing it; he has no concern about water levels. The government's economic policies have changed over the past two decades; industrialists are its advisers now. Potable water in the reservoirs is dwindling. No water is available for irrigation, and yet the state committee has sanctioned water for industrial parks..." (Agnihotri, 2021, p.186). The narrative highlights the contradiction inherent in government policies where water intensive crops like sugarcane are cultivated, depleting the water resources. The promotion of water- intensive crops like sugarcane in drought prone areas despite the lack of irrigation facilities is an illustration of the government as a blind spectator of unsustainable agriculture. The government's support policies for sugarcane create a pervasive incentive for farmers to grow their crop despite the determinant impact on water levels. The government's neoliberal policies and action favour corporates, perpetuating a cycle of exploitation and profiteering. The Indian farmers' protest in 2020, sparked by three new farm laws, parallels the themes explored in Anitha Agnihotri's novel, *The Sickle*. The laws aimed at reforming the agricultural sector, were perceived as a threat to farmers' livelihoods. It prompted demands for a guaranteed Minimum Support Price, withdrawal of the laws, and better crop prices. The law's provisions, allowing corporate entities to purchase produce directly, raised concerns about exploitation, debt burdens, and price manipulation. *The Sickle* explores similar themes of exploitation and struggle in rural India, highlighting the impact of neoliberal policies on farmers' lives. The protest timeline, marked by key events from August 2020 to November 2021, had a significant impact on Indian politics and society, raising awareness about farmers' struggles and fostering unity among farmers. The farmers' protest in 2020 in India, which saw millions of farmers demanding better prices for their produce and protection from corporate exploitation, has striking parallels with the themes explored in the novel. The protest was sparked by the Indian government's introduction of three new farm laws in 2020, which aimed to reform the agricultural sector. However, farmers across the country saw these laws as a threat to their livelihoods and protested against them. Their main demands included a guaranteed Minimum Support Price (MSP) for their crops, the withdrawal of the three new farm laws, and better prices for their crops. The three laws that sparked widespread protests from farmers in India have eerie parallels with the themes explored in *The Sickle*. The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce Act, the Farmers Agreement on Price Assurance Act, and the Essential Commodities Amendment Act all aimed to reform the agricultural sector, but farmers feared they would lead to exploitation by corporate entities. These laws could allow corporate entities to purchase farmers' produce directly, leading to exploitation and loss of bargaining power. Farmers may also face increased debt burdens and dependence on corporate entities. Furthermore, the laws could lead to hoarding and price manipulation, increased price volatility, and negative impacts on food security. *The Sickle*, written by Anita Agnihotri, explores similar themes of exploitation and struggle in rural India. The parallels between the novel and the real-life protests against these laws serve as a powerful reminder of the ongoing struggles of farmers in India. The protest timeline is marked by key events, including the start of protests in August 2020, the escalation of protests in September 2020, and the eventual repeal of the three farm laws in November 2021. The protest had a significant impact on Indian politics and society, raising awareness about the struggles faced by farmers and creating a sense of unity and

solidarity among farmers from different states and backgrounds. The 2020 farm laws, introduced to liberalize agricultural trade, sparked nationwide protests due to fears of corporate dominance and the potential erosion of the MSP system. Their eventual repeal in 2021 reflected the political and legal weight of these protests, yet the central issue—the lack of a legal guarantee for MSP—remains unresolved. The novel provides a powerful critique of economic systems leading to inequality and exploitation, echoing the concerns of protesting farmers.

8. UNSUSTAINABLE PRACTICES

Farmer distress not only persists in drought affected areas but also in the well off areas where there is adequate water supply. Even farmers in Bilwan had complains: “the grape harvest was not as good as it used to be and costs had gone up threefold over the past ten years. Fertilizers, pesticides, seed - they had all become more expensive. Profits had fallen” (Agnihotri, 2021, p.200). Gyanvant contemplates “on one hand, there was a dearth of the food for cattle, because of the lack of irrigation and on the other an excess of water, was allowing sugarcane to be grown as food for starving cattle. What an array of contradictions this country is” (Agnihotri, 2021, p.200). Farmers grow sugarcane and soybean in Bilwan alongside Grapes, but they derive no satisfaction from the fact that those who grow sugarcane get the best price. Gyanvant feels overwhelmed about it. “How could he explain? What would Gyanvant possibly tell them about balanced use of water and the nature of farming? They were not ready to listen to any of it. Their account books were managed differently”. (Agnihotri, 2021, p.201) This shows how even farmers do not pay heed to sustainable agriculture as they are driven towards money only. But in “nature’s economy currency is not money, it is life” (Shiva, 2005, p.33).

According to scientists, soil degradation in India has reached alarming levels. On average, soil erosion in India is estimated at about **20 tonnes per hectare per year**, compared with the global average of roughly 2.4 tonnes per hectare per year — indicating a topsoil loss nearly an order of magnitude higher than the world mean (Centre for Science and Environment, 2025). This severe erosion undermines the soil’s “natural resilience,” meaning that degraded land is unlikely to recover fertility without deliberate intervention (Centre for Science and Environment, 2025). Moreover, climate change is expected to exacerbate the crisis: increased rainfall and rising soil acidity could accelerate degradation, with projections indicating that acidic soils in India might expand by up to **40 million hectares** in the coming years.

The tumultuous dynamic between humanity and the natural world is a long-standing phenomenon. Throughout history, humans have grappled with the challenges of existence on Earth, engaging in perpetual struggle of survival against nature’s formidable forces. Scientific consensus is clear that human activities and unsustainable agriculture are significantly contributing to the environmental degradation and acceleration of global warming which further contributes to intensified droughts and water scarcity. With far reaching consequences for ecosystem economics and human societies. Unsustainable agriculture, extractivism and anthropocentrism is the main reason of natural degradation and ultimately the root causes of agrarian crisis.

9. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the crisis faced by Indian farmers is a complex issue that requires a multifaceted solution. The subjugation of Indian farmers by the East India Company, the legacy of colonialism, the advent of capitalism and extractivism, the neoliberal policies of globalization, unsustainable agriculture and the impact of climate change have all contributed to the current crisis. To address this crisis, it is essential to adopt a holistic approach that takes into account the social, economic, and environmental factors that affect farmers' livelihoods. This can be achieved by implementing policies that promote sustainable agriculture, provide adequate support prices for crops, and protect farmers' rights. Additionally, it is essential to address the root causes of climate change and work towards reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Only by adopting a comprehensive and sustainable approach can we hope to mitigate the crisis facing Indian farmers who ensure our food security.

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