



Agrarian Distress, Altruistic Suicide, and Agriculturists in India: A Sociological Study of *Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga* (2022)

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Abstract

The promises of Swaminathan's Green Revolution have almost vanished now as the country faces agrarian distress. In India, not only the farmers are facing distress, but also the sector of agriculture is heading towards a perennial crisis. The present article, through Srijit Mukherji's *Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga* (2022), proposes to analyse the Indian agrarian distress in the twenty-first century. The film is based on the events faced by the people of *Jhundao*, a village near Pilibhit district of Uttar Pradesh, India. The primary objective of the work is to investigate the reason for suicide in the protagonist *Gangaram* (Pankaj Tripathi) of the film, and its association with contemporary Indian agriculturists. The article also tends to explore the cinematic representations of farmers in India. The article employs Émile Durkheim's (1858-1917) theory of altruistic suicide that he propounds in his book *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1897) to understand the intricacies of fatal decisions made by the agriculturists of the country. *India's agricide: Transition from an agrarian to a non-agrarian economy* published by the Centre for Science and Environment (2022), and P. Sainath's film *Nero's Guests* (2009) work as background documents for formulating arguments regarding the contemporary agrarian situation of India.

Keywords: Agrarian distress, Altruistic Suicide, Agriculturist, Farmers in India, *Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga*.

1. Agriculture and the Agriculturists in India

In India, not only the farmers are facing distress, but also the sector of agriculture is heading towards crisis. The present article, through the case of *Gangaram*, the protagonist of the film *Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga* (2022), takes upon the task to unravel the various dimensions of Indian agrarian distress. The land question remains at the center to the present article as "There is no question on earth as powerful as land: who owns it; how it is used; and whether it is treated as commodity, as living relative, as an ally in the climate fight, an extractive resource, as a home, as a territory." (Shattuck, 2023, p. 490) The way the land of any country is utilized can assist in understanding the deepest secret of the country. If the land is owned by the corporates, it infers the capitalistic approach of any nation, on the contrary, if the land is controlled by the state and its utilization is regulated by it, the country is likely to be communist-friendly. Therefore, exploring the exploitation, and regulation of the people related to land remains an essential question.

The correspondence for the sector of agriculture, and poverty is highly lacking in India. Where multiple National and International conferences are organized every year regarding fashion shows, there is a total absence of sensitization for covering the issues of the agriculturists. Leonard Cohen's notion represented in his song "Everybody Knows" is fully realized, as he articulates the sad reality of the modern world: *Poor stays poor, rich get rich*. Identical are the policies of the government that have strong and rich in its center.

Following the latest official census, around 55 per cent of the Indian population is involved in agriculture. Out of which, only 30 per cent is own land. In accordance with "the Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation (MoSPI), the Gross Value Added (GVA) of agriculture and allied sectors in 2020-21 was 20.1%, it was 19% in 2021-22, and it again came down to 18.3% in 2022-23." (Singh, 2023) The data displays the disparity in income between the agriculturists and the population involved in other sectors. It is this economic imbalance that supposedly results in the present unavoidable agricultural crisis, and affects the psychological health of the people related to this particular sector. Thus, in India, "It becomes interesting to understand whether the economic explanation of farmer suicide actually fits better than psychological or psychosocial ones." (Roy, 2021, p. 50)

Morgan Ody, the new General Coordinator of La Via Campesina International, discusses her vision for rural movements and points out how the peasants' identity is in question everywhere. She talks about the universal humiliation they have to go through in their life—whether it is when they cannot pay their loans, or while performing their perpetual repetitive tasks:

Peasants are humiliated for being peasants and for having the culture of being peasants. Even when I was a teenager it was tough. I mean I would really experience this humiliation, having the other children yelling, 'Yeah, you are the daughter of a peasant!' Most peasants, I think have felt this humiliation. (Ody, 2023, p. 542)

2. The Agrarian Conundrum in India: *India's Agricide*

The construction of the path by Swaminathan which he pioneered through the Green Revolution in the distant village of India, has turned into an abyss now. In India, not only the farmers are facing distress, but also the sector of agriculture is heading towards a perennial crisis. The book *India's agricide* (2022) which happens to be a prominent text for drawing propositions in the present article, perfectly captures the multiple dimensions of Indian agrarian situation. With well-framed arguments, it precisely addresses the issues prevalent in the agriculture sector of India. The book succeeds in contemplating the transformation in India as a country of agriculturists since the green revolution till the contemporary time, i.e., 2022. It has subtly outlined the problems that an agriculturist faces in the farming and its allied sectors. The book that is must read for anybody who wants to understand the base and superstructure of Indian economy; the suicide problem of the farmers; the meteorological intricacies and its relation to the agriculture produce; or the population divide of the country, contemplates on the transformation in India as a country of agriculturists. It also portrays the anatomy of altruistic suicide in Indian Farmers.

P. Sainath (b. 1957), former editor of the Rural Affairs in *The Hindu*, and the founder of PARI (People's Archive of Rural India), famous for his interests in poverty, farmers protests, structural inequalities, and caste discriminations, made a documentary film *Nero's Guests* (2009). The film systematically portrays the farmers' position in India. The film begins by drawing a parallel between the notorious Roman emperor who carelessly watched and played on lyre while his city was on fire, and with current political indifference towards Indian agrarian distress. For Sainath, the problem was never Nero, but his guests who

participated happily in a party thrown by the emperor just after the fire in the city. Since the party was to be organized in the night, and there was no provision for lightening, Nero ordered all the prisoners to be burned on stake so that guests don't have to face the problem of darkness. The light that comes in the feast that included the lawyers, poets, artists, and thinkers was paid by humans' death. So is the situation in Indian farming. The problem is not with the corporates or the capitalists who want to reap profits by the 'burning' of the farmers but with the policymakers in India.

India's Agricide records something similar: "Can farming be made lucrative?" questions the consumer-oriented policies and bad handling of the government of India in the case of the present agrarian crisis. The recent farm laws that were repealed later due to the largest ongoing protest in the history of agrarian society reveal the hidden capitalist motive of the government that in no sense is in favor of the farmers. What happens within the vicious consumerist culture "crop output value is used as a proxy for farmers' income. But in recent years, we have witnessed no correlation between crop output and the income of farmers." (p. 92) The chapter shows that the government of India's moves are quite contrary to what countries do where agrarian situation is good: the price of farming products is always set higher than the world level prices. It concludes with the proposition how the policies have to be utterly different if the government wishes to take appropriate majors: "So, a government has to decide whether it wants to support the farmer or the consumer." (p. 103) The predatory commercialization of farming in rural India leads to the distressed condition of the farmers.

It finds that in rich countries like Japan, South Korea, Norway and Iceland, producer support ranged between 40 and 60 per cent of the gross farming receipt in 2019. In the United States it is roughly 12 per cent and in the European Union (EU) it is 20 per cent. But in India, the producer support - what the government pays as a percentage of the farming receipt — is actually negative (-5 per cent). In other words, the farming sector, owned and managed by some of the poorest people in the world, subsidises what we eat. (Narain, 2021)

The policies that are made by the GOI need to be carefully updated in accordance with the incessantly changing nature and its aspects need to be updated.

The Indian agrarian economy and society has witnessed substantial changes since the days of the British Raj. Prior to the introduction of the British rule, agriculture was mostly specific to local needs and the area under cultivation was adjusted to increases and decreases in population. (Das, 2011, p. 47)

In the chapter "A new crop calendar", of the book *India's Agricide*, we find a critical analysis of the effect of changing weather conditions on agriculture in India. The climate of India has changed drastically, with the shifting in the rain, but the calendar of the sowing has not been updated in a very long time leading to a substantial loss for agriculturists: "Farmers who adhere to the crop calendar often face crop loss." (p. 26) Rainfed crops like paddy are badly affected due to this irregular revision of rain. Although a revised crop calendar can do good to the yields, but it is not only the rain that the farmers need to worry about but also other weather conditions like rise in the temperature: "India is one of the most vulnerable countries in the world when it comes to climate change. According to estimates, India could witness a temperature rise of over 4°C by the last quarter of the century." (p. 34) The village of *Jhundao*, a place where Srijit Mukherji has set his *Sherdil: The Pilbhit Saga* although has been portrayed as badly affected by drought. Nevertheless, it has extraneous problems like the animals destroying the harvest and a bad implications of subsidies remain among many prevailing problems that Indian agriculturists face.

3. Farmers' Representation in Cinema

Shyam Benegal's *Rural Trilogy* which includes *Ankur* (1974), *Nishant* (1975), *Manthan* (1976) happens to be the "stories of change, and more importantly, stories of real India-closer than ever to its roots." (Sourajit Saha and ind. Ingenious, 2021) Alexander Dovzhenko's "Ukraine Trilogy" deals with similar people as Benegal's Rural Trilogy. It includes *Zvengora*, *Arsenal*, and *Earth*. These films are though labelled as counterrevolutionary, nevertheless, had a pioneering intervention in regard to peasant's problems that they faced because of the extremely regularized government scheme of collectivization. *Lagan* (2001) becomes the film that represented the oppression of the farmers portraying the farmers' overregulation in the British colonised India.

Hindi cinema is replete with the theme of psychological tensions among the farmers caused by agrarian distress. For instance, in *Peepli Live* (Rizvi, 2010), *Natha* (Omkar Das Manikpuri) decides to commit suicide to enable his family for compensation. *Kadvi Hawa* (Panda, 2017) is based on agriculturists' suicide in a remote village of India called *Mahua*. Srijit Mukherji's film *Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga* (Mukherji, 2022) belongs to this aforementioned tradition which contemplates the psychological fragility of human beings belonging to the profession of agriculture in a remote village in India. "As for the factors underlying farmers' suicide—like issues underlying any suicide—they would be extremely complex, involving socio-economic, cultural and psychological factors." (Nagraj, 2008, p. 5). Therefore, the elements responsible for suicide in India are intriguing and complex.

4. *Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga*, and its Major Issues

Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga (Mukherji, 2022) is a film that portrays the character of *Gangaram* (Pankaj Tripathi), popularly known as *Gangu* throughout the film, the *Sarpanch* (chief of village) of a remote village named *Jhundao* which is situated near the Pilibhit Tiger Reserve, Uttar Pradesh, India. The film is set amidst a famine, a result of drought, and the incessant fear caused by the wild animals. But it is not very late in the film that we decode that the agrarian crisis does not subscribe to a singularity of reasons, but the reasons are numerous:

Climate change is not the only agrarian ecological crisis hitting rural people. Soil loss, erosion, biodiversity loss, surface and groundwater depletion, pesticide contamination, cancers, water pollution, deforestation: the ecological challenges of making a living – and a life – in the countryside are keenly felt across diverse regions of the world. (Shattuck et al., 2023, p. 4)

The setting of the film is a place where "The officials and the police accused certain villagers of leaving their elderly in the jungle to be killed by the tiger, planting the remains in the field then coming to the government for the compensation" (Mukherji, 2022, 01:15:56). In the film under discussion *Gangaram* goes to the city with the hope that any scheme could emancipate his village in these times of crises. Since he does not get any positive response from the officials, he comes up with an alternative plan to sacrifice his life for the betterment of his village. As *Gangaram* is about to depart from the office, he catches the attention of the announcement made by the Government of India that the people killed by the tiger will be getting compensation of one million Indian rupees. The compensatory amount is considerable, and *Gangaram* thinks it would resolve his village's rudimentary problem, at least for the time being. He will die, but all others will survive. The rest of the film becomes a document to depict the valiant, and altruistic quest of *Gangu*.

In *Nero's Guest* (56:02), P. Sainath cites the case of Kashi Vishweshar Rao, a Farmer who always told people to keep hope, and saw quite negatively to the people who committed

suicide, himself surrendered to the unavoidable destiny, and took his life in 2004. Farming is a profession that requires a lot of hope because a majority of the elements needed for the yield happens to be beyond the control of human beings. For instance, the film *Mitti: Back to the Root* (2018) has a scene where the irrigation system of the farmer fails, and the whole of the cotton produce comes at stake. The agriculturists take loan from the local money lenders with very high-interest rates ranging from 20-50 per cent annum. The process which the bank requires them to go through either happens to be beyond their comprehension, or, or it needs a considerable amount of time which, considering the crop calendar, they don't have. Within this situation if a tragedy like the rain crisis strikes, the farmers don't only risk the current yield but also lose their house, and land which they put on the mortgage while taking the loan, leaving them with no other choice than ending their life.

Although the central quest of the present work is to explore the issue of altruistic suicide in the character of *Gangaram* amidst agrarian distress, nevertheless, it is of prominence importance to discuss other underlying issues in the film. The film questions the anthropocentric world. The character of the poacher, Jim Ahmed (Neeraj Kabi) who becomes a companion of *Gangu*, portrays the magnanimity of the forests. *Gangaram* asks Jim, "Tell me, how old is the jungle?" to which Jim replies, "Very old, *Gangaram*. Not years, but ages. Remember, before all of us, before animals and insects, even before life began on earth...there was the jungle." (Mukherji, 2022, 01:12:24-01:14:49) Man- animal problem remains a prominent point of debates formulated around the strange case of *Gangaram*. The character of Pankaj Tripathi himself confesses in his trial scene that he is flabbergasted as he claims, "Are the animals the trespassers? Or are we?" (Mukherji, 2022, 01:45:17-01:45:20) To question the gender stereotypes in a patriarchal society is another issue that the film addresses. When Jim talks about going out hunting the next day because all their food was exhausted, *Gangaram* asks ironically, "So, do the wives cook in the animal kingdom as well?" (Mukherji, 2022, 01:22:29) The film also offers a satire on the Indian government that believes only in making schemes and never worries about its implementation. Since half of the voters belong to the agrarian community, the government announces something 'special' about the peasants in every budget. However, the benefits that are to come through these schemes remain a far cry to the people belonging to a majority of villages like *Jhundao* in India. The schemes are designed in such a way that they are inaccessible to the villagers, and this is what happens to *Gangaram* when he visits the officials in the city. The *Sarpanch* tells the officials how people from his village are on the verge to commit suicide because of poverty and starvation and official demands the cause of this poverty and starvation saying that they are all just symptoms. When *Gangu* begins counting the causes, for instance, how the wild animals have jeopardized the crops, and how the drought caused famine a year ago, the official demands, "Just get me certificates from the Forest and the Climate Department." (Mukherji, 2022, 06:34) Due to improper guidance and inappropriate exposure to all legality, *Gangaram* finds the scheme beyond his comprehension.

6. Death in Srijit Mukherji's films

Srijit Mukherji (b. 1977), who predominantly worked in Bengali cinema, made *Autograph* in 2010, which is considered his first feature film. *Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga* was not the first movie in which Srijit Mukherji addressed the issue of suicide. In his Bengali language film *Hemlock Society* (Mukherji, 2012), he depicts the importance of life—something contradictory to the motto of Hemlock Society— "God Life, Good Death", and the film ultimately turns out to be pro-life. As "Asked if the theme of assisted suicide is not a promotion of euthanasia (mercy killing), Srijit replied in the negative, insisting once again that it neither legitimates suicide, nor any other mode of death" (Times of India, 2017). On one hand *Baishe Srabon* (2011) and *Hemlock Society* (2012), that involve plots where the characters explicitly encounter the fear of death", the film in question evolves around the

protagonists' acceptance of death for the greater good of humanity. (Ferdous, R, & Kareem, 2023, p. 159)

In [*Baishe Srabon*] (2011), the most successful ex-police officer Probir transforms into a serial killer to regain self-esteem by demonstrating his intelligence to the police department. Even his suicide intends to uphold heroism, a sacrifice for the greater good, which is, according to TMT, a venture to achieve emblematic divinity. Contrariwise, in [*Hemlock Society*] (2012), Ananda Kar's anti-suicide mission is a pro-life venture and an initiative to seek immortality, which will keep his name alive after his physical death. (Ferdous, R, & Kareem, 2023, p. 172)

Before venturing into his quest, *Gangaram* calls for a meeting in which the level of social integration of all his villagers is on trial. When it comes to choosing between the life of others and the life of self, everybody seems to be coinciding with individual interests. It is in this situation, the *Sarpanch*, who has successfully constructed the narrative that he has been suffering from cancer, says, "Why not uproot the 'cancer' of the village, and then die!" Thus, he agrees to sacrifice himself for the sake of his fellow villagers. (Mukherji, 2022, 25:38).

7. The theme of altruistic suicide

Émile Durkheim's (1858-1917) theory of suicide that he propounds in his book *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1897) "remains among the most widely-read sociological treatise" (Lopreato and Chafetz, 1979, p. 115). In the document mentioned above, Durkheim offers four types of suicide: Egoistic Suicide, Altruistic Suicide, Anomic Suicide, and Fatalistic Suicide. The categorization of suicide happens to be based on two elements, i.e., integration, and regulation. An individual's lack of integration to a greater cause, or goal inveigles him/her into egotistical suicide, whereas, too much integration into some institution/ society leads to altruistic suicide. Lack of proper regulation turns into anomic suicide, whereas an extreme level of regulation comes up as fatalistic suicide.

Gangaram is compelled to commit altruistic suicide as "The weight of society is thus brought to bear on him to lead him to destroy himself... This sacrifice then is imposed by society for social ends" (Durkheim, 1951, pp. 219-20). He constructs a narrative so that his mother and his wife *Lajwanti* (Sayani Gupta), popularly known as *Lajjo*, would easily allow him to go to the forest to be killed by the tiger. In order to convince his family members, *Gangaram's* story goes as follows: "Do you remember I had coughed up blood while eating?...it recurred when I was in the city with Mahesh...I coughed up blood constantly for three or four days...The doctor checked me... and said "Gangaram, you have Cancer""(Mukherji, 2022, 14:49 -15:29). None of which is true in reality. *Gangu's* will to sacrifice himself is so strong that he opts to live in accordance with the constructed narrative for most of the time in the film. It is only when Mahesh visits the village that the dark secret of *Gangu* is revealed to his wife *Lajjo*. *Gangu* is cautious enough about the villagers getting money. This is the reason why he plans the remanent his body to be taken to the fields after the tiger has killed him. He is so conscious about it that he applies some bitter leaves on his hands so that the tiger does not eat his thumb making the verification process made easy. He tells Jim, "These are some bitter leaves...If Mr. Tiger eats me, it will spare the thumb. And we'll be able to claim the money" (Mukherji, 2022, 01:12:16). Although, the altruistic mission of *Gangaram* is a failure, nevertheless, he becomes a celebrity towards the end of the film as his case catches the attention of the media. His village *Jhundao* comes into the limelight. *Gangu* ironically succumbs to the ways of consumer culture which he had abhorred his whole life. He participates in several advertisements and gets used to several lies. He meets the irony of his fate on his way towards the forest to work on a park project along with a political leader, he gets down to take a loo break and is really consumed by a tiger.

8. Conclusion

The film addresses one of the most prominent agrarian issues of the 21st century—the suicide problem of the farmers. In contemporary India where the agriculturists' suicide rate is 47 per cent higher than they are for others, and agrarian distress remains a significant problem of the country, Srijit Mukherji's *Sherdil: The Pilibhit Saga* happens to be an essential film which offers the intricacies of deep-rooted economic and psychological conundrum among the farmers. If the film does not offer any solution to overcome the aforementioned crises, it at least helps diagnose this fatal threat that almost half of the population of India is facing. Through the subtle narrative of *Gangaram's* quest for altruistic suicide, Srijit Mukherji succeeds in translating the unpleasant inner world and realities of agriculturists in India.

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