

Our farmers are dying, to hell with the World Cup

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farmers will be left in the lurch.

Yes, you read it right; to hell with the World Cup; to hell with the celebrations; to hell with all the free land and money being showered by different governments on the players. How can I jump, scream, have gallons of beer and cheer for the nation when a few kilometres away the farmers and feeders of my country are taking their own lives in hordes?

Do you know that, on average, 47 farmers have been committing suicide every single day in the past 16 years in our shining India — the next economic power, progressive with nine per cent growth?

Last month, on March 5, Friday evening, when Bangalore's watering holes were getting filled up, when all the DJs were blaring out deafening music, when we were busy discussing India's chances at the World Cup, sitting in CCDs and Baristas — just 100 km away from Bangalore, Swamy Gowda and Vasanthamma, a young farmer couple, hanged themselves, leaving their three very young children to fend for themselves or, most likely, die of malnutrition.

Why did they do it? Were they fighting? No. Were they drunkards? No. Did they have incurable diseases? No! Then WHY? Because they were unable to repay a loan of Rs. 80,000 (a working IT couple's one month salary? 2-3 months EMI?) for years, which had gradually increased to Rs. 1.2 lakh. Because they knew that now they would never be able to pay it back. Because they were hurt. Hurt by our government which announced a huge reduction in import duty for silk in this year's budget (from 30 per cent to 5 per cent). They were struggling silk farmers and instead of help from the government, they get this! Decrease in import duty means the markets will now be flooded with cheap Chinese silk (as everything else) and our own

On average, 17,000 farmers have been committing suicide every year, for the past 15 years on the trot. Can you believe it? Most of us wouldn't know this fact. Why? Because, our great Indian media, the world's biggest media, are not interested in reporting this! Why? Because they are more interested in covering fashion week extravaganzas. They are more interested in 'why team India was not practising when Pakistanis were sweating it out in stadium on the eve of the match?' They are more interested in Poonam Pandey.

The media are supposed to be the third eye of democracy and also called the fourth estate, but now they have become real estate. Pure business.

So any attention from the media is out of the question. Who is left then? The government? But we all know how it works. The other day, I was passing by Vidhan Soudha in Bangalore and happened to read the slogan written at the entrance, "Government work is god's work". Now I know why our government has left all its work to god!

Karnataka Chief Minister B.S. Yeddyurappa announced plots for all the players. But land? In Bangalore? You must be kidding, Mr. C.M. So he retracts and now wants to give money. But where will it come from? Taxes, yours and mine. Don't the poor farmers need the land or money more than those players who are already earning in crores?

A government-owned bank will give you loan at six per cent interest rate if you are buying a Mercedes but if a poor farmer wants to buy a tractor, do you know how much it is charging him? Fifteen per cent! Look at the depths of inequality. Water is Rs. 15 a litre and a SIM card is for free! For how long can we bite the hand that is feeding us? The recent onion price fiasco was just a trailer. Picture abhi baaki hai doston!

In 2008, Lakme India fashion

show venue was in a Mumbai five-star hotel and was covered by 500 journalists and the theme was 'Cotton'. A few hours drive from there, cotton farmers were committing suicide, 4 or 5, everyday! How many TV journalists covered this? Zero!

Sixty-seventy per cent of India's population is living on less than Rs. 20 a day. A bottle of Diet coke for us? The electricity used in a day-night match could help a farmer irrigate his fields for more than a few weeks! Do you know that losil bedding is also class dependent? Two hours in metros, 4 in towns and 8 in villages. Now, who needs electricity more? A farmer to look after his crop day and night, irrigate, pump water

On average, 47 farmers have been committing suicide every single day in the past 16 years in our shining India

and use machines or a few bored, young professionals with disposable incomes, to log on to Facebook and watch IPL?

How can we splurge thousands on our birthday parties and zoom past in our AC vehicles and sit in cushy chairs in our AC offices and plan a weekend trip to Coorg when on the way, in those small villages, just a few minutes' walk from the roads, someone might be consuming pesticide or hanging himself from a tree for just Rs.10, 000? How can we?

There was much panic when there was swine flu. Every single death in the country was reported second by second, minute by minute. Why? Because it directly affected our salaried, ambitious, tech-savvy, middle-class. So there were masks, special relief centres, enquiry centres set up by government to please this section. On the other hand, 47 people are dying, every single day for the past 15 years. Anybody cared to do anything?

It has been observed that within months of a farmer

taking his life, his wife follows, either by poisoning the kids first or leaving them on their own. In Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh, a distressed woman farmer went to the government seed shop, bought a bottle of pesticide, on credit, went home and drank it. She was under debt for most of her life and now — even her death was on credit!

Centuries ago, there was a Roman emperor, called Nero. He was a strong ruler and also very fond of parties, art, poetry, drinking and a life full of pleasures. Once he decided to organise a grand party and invited all poets, writers, dancers, painters, artists, intellectuals and thinkers of society. Everybody was having a great time eating, drink-

ing, laughing, and socialising. The party was at its peak when it started getting dark. Nero wanted the party to go on. So he ordered and got all the arrested criminals, who were in his jails, around the garden and put them on fire! Burnt them alive, so that there was enough light for the guests to keep on enjoying! The guests had a gala time though they knew the cost of their enjoyment. Now, what kind of conscience those guests had?

Nero's guests

What is happening in our country is not different from Nero's party. We, the middle-class-young-well-earning-mall-hopping-IPL-watching and celebrating-junta are Nero's guests enjoying at the cost of our farmers. Every budget favours the already rich. More exemptions are being given to them at the cost of grabbing the land of our farmers in the name of SEZs, decrease in import duties in the name of neo-liberal policies, increase in the loan interest rates if the product is not worth lakhs and crores. Yes, that's what we are, Nero's guests!

I'm not against celebrations. I'm not against cricket. I'm not against World Cup. I would be the first person to scream, celebrate and feel proud of any of India's achievements but, only if all fellow countrymen, farmers, villagers also stand with me and cheer; only if they do not take their own lives ruthlessly, only if there is no difference between interest rates for a Mercedes and a tractor. That would be the day! also zoom past on a bike, post-Indian win, with an Indian Flag in hand and screaming *Bharat Mata Ki Jai*. But no, not today. Not at the cost of my feeders. Until then, this is what I say. To hell with your malls. To hell with your IPL. To hell with your World Cup. And to hell with your celebrations.

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