The Vidarbha region of Maharashtra consists of eleven districts: Akola, Amravati, Washim, Nagpur, Yavatmal, Wardha, Buldhana, Chandrapur, Bhandara, Gadchiroli and Gondia. As of 2012, 65% of the population living in this region was dependent on agriculture and allied activities for their livelihood. This is due to two reasons – a) the region has not received much industrial attention leading to underdevelopment of other job opportunities and b) lack of infrastructure.

Largely being an agrarian economy, Vidarbha is infamous for one of the highest farmer suicide rates in the country. This region contributes to almost half of the farmer suicide cases in the entire state of Maharashtra. The Visual Storyboards team at the Centre for New Economics Studies spoke to the residents, farmers – and activists from the Yavatmal and Wardha districts to understand this crisis and the reasons for the poor agri-development of Vidarbha.
It was observed that uninterrupted access to water and electricity still remains a struggle in Vidarbha. Residents reported that in many areas, electricity is available only for a few hours a day. Other facilities such as access to roads and schools too are far-fetched resulting in a very poor standard of living for the villagers.

Unfortunately, even agriculture in this region has not been very promising as it sears below the national and state averages of productivity. This water-scarce belt receives 400-600 mm rainfall annually and relies heavily on cotton production. Insufficient water supply damages the crop very easily making it a high-risk entity for the farmers. Therefore, proper irrigation facilities are necessary for a fruitful yield. Sadly, of the eight districts that specialize in cultivating cotton, only 8-10% regions have proper irrigation connections.

“For farming, electricity is only provided for 12 hours. In a week, we have access to it during the day only for three days, the rest is supplied at night.”

-GOPAL, A FARMER FROM YAVATMAL DISTRICT
The other factors that prevent high yields in Vidarbha are the micronutrients level in the soil and repeated attacks from wild animals. “The animals cause a lot of damage. They destroy crops worth 1 lakh rupees annually” claims Tushar who lost his father to suicide. Due to several challenges, farmers undertake the sowing cycle twice in order to make up for the lost crops.

However, this only pushes them in debts as they borrow continuously. Government sources are too time consuming and complicated as they demand multiple documents and visits before providing the loan. On the other hand, quick money from private money lenders comes at soaring interest rates of 16 to 18 percent.

“THERE IS NO WATER IN OUR LAND... IT IS DRY. IT DRIES UP REALLY QUICK. IF I POUR WATER TODAY, IT ONLY TAKES 2-3 DAYS TO DRY UP AGAIN.”

-MAHANANDA TOMBE, A WOMEN FARMER FROM TEMBI (NER)
Additionally, market forces too do not work in the favour of these farmers. Since many lack the infrastructure to store their crops, the market has a heavy supply of crops as soon as the harvest is ready. This brings down the market prices depriving farmers from a decent income that they can use to repay their loans. In this manner, small scale farmers often fall into the debt-trap. Due to lack of natural resources, farming becomes difficult and due to lack of choice and proper infrastructure, changing professions is an utopian option.

“ONE OF THE MAJOR ISSUES THAT VIDARBHA HAS IS THE PROBLEM OF IRRIGATION.... MAJORITY OF FARMING HERE IS NON-IRRIGATIONAL. IF WE SEE THE DATA OF LAST 4-5 YEARS, WE WILL FIND THAT THE RATE OF SUICIDE IS MORE AMONG FARMERS THAT DON’T HAVE IRRIGATION FACILITY.”

~ HARISH ETHAPE
COORDINATOR FOR VIDARBHA REGION
NAAM FOUNDATION
THE POLITICAL SETTING

In 2018, the State saw a massive protest led by widows of the farmers who died by suicide. This protest was supported by Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch (MAKAAM), an organization that studied and found that only 40% of women have gotten land rights after their husband's death, while others still struggled for them. These widows demanded that the government recognize their land rights and wanted them to facilitate the process.

Along with land rights, the widow women farmers put forward the demands for an increase in the ex-gratia amount provided by the government in cases of farmer suicide, pension, better healthcare, and a helpline for suicide prevention.

In 2019, after a political crisis, Maharashtra saw a power shift, where Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) formed the government in the State after a post-poll coalition.
MVA being the post-poll coalition didn’t have any joint manifesto, but both Shivsena and NCP promised pro-agrarian policies. Since MVA, 2567 farmer suicides were recorded in Maharashtra in the year 2020, and 4,006 suicides in the year 2021. This reflects that not much has changed after the MVA.

In 2020, farmers didn’t get the relief of a loan waiver, even though 2019 was a tough year due to unseasonal rainfall.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 lockdown, in the fourth quarter of 2021, the MVA announced a relief package of 10,000 to compensate the farmers whose crops were destroyed during the rainfall and floods. The second state loan waiver was also implemented in the state, however, all these combined too didn’t have much of an effect on the farmer suicides in the State.

Gopal Chavhan (38), a farmer and social worker with his mother Parvatabai (68) stand next to the portrait of Vasantrao Naik, considered as Father of the Green Revolution in Maharashtra at their residence in Ner tehsil, Yavatmal district.
THE AFTERMATH OF FARMER SUICIDES

Through our interviews, we also observed a pattern in systematic abuse that farming families are subjected to. Reporting of suicide cases undermine other chronic issues faced by the farming community, such as drug overuse or mental instability. Within the family, the father-farmer of the household usually doesn’t transfer the entitlement of land to other members in the family, which affects the family's ability to generate income from farmer across generations. Many young farmers without land ownership rights find it difficult to earn enough for their livelihood. This also dampens their dignity and socially perceived sense of identity as a farmer.

Along with rising farmer suicides in Vidarbha, gendered oppression continues parallelly. Widows are left at the mercy of their in-laws and rarely become beneficiaries of the land previously owned by their husbands. To avail the compensation or ex-gratia, women go through a round of investigation that includes recounting the incident several times, proving and documenting the details of the suicide.
Still, the compensation is meagre and cannot buy them more land. This renders them as farm labourers as opposed to farmers. The daily wage for female labourers is 150 rupees, which is much lesser when compared to their male counterparts that earn 350 – 400 rupees daily.

A study found that widowed women farmers only became more vulnerable during and after the COVID-19 lockdown. The Maharashtra government issued a government resolution (GR) which stated that land right along with 7/12, would be transferred to the widow, in case of farmer suicide, and it was hailed to be very progressive. But it failed in the implementation stage, and the widow women farmers still struggle for their land rights. Amidst such difficulties, women farmers such as Mahananda Tombe stand as inspiration to other widowed farm labourers. With a 12 acre land under her possession, Mahananda has risen one of the few successful female farmers in the region. She divorced her husband due to his addiction to drugs and took out a loan of 80,000 rupees that she managed to repay over the years. Today, her fields have an automatic water connection and she has built storage facilities at her home allowing her to tackle the challenges otherwise commonly seen in the region.
Mahananda Devidas Tompe (35), a farmer stands next to water sprinklers that she installed to keep her land irrigated at Tembi village, Yavatmal district. Tompe says she takes the help of her two dogs to keep a watch on wild animals during night.