

# THE NATURE OF THINGS

DEATH AND DUALISM IN INDIAN VILLAGES



AN EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS & PHOTOGRAPHS  
By KOTA NEELIMA



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### *Death and Dualism in Indian Villages*

There have been above 3.2 lakh farmer suicides between 1995-2016, and Maharashtra leads in the number of farmer suicides in the country. Of the total toll since 1997, 69,642 farmer suicides have taken place in Maharashtra alone. (Source: National Crime Records Bureau). Within the state, the regions of Marathwada and Vidarbha have witnessed the highest number of suicides by farmers.

The reasons for farmer suicides are several: inadequate loans and crop prices, unsuitable seeds and agri-practices, low public investment in irrigation and other infra-structure, policy shortfalls of agricultural planning and financial management, land fragmentation and poverty, climate change and drought, incompatible agri-

Market structures, increase in crop input costs, health and education expenses, etc. Further, the research in both Marathwada and Vidarbha shows severe impact on households of farmer suicides through a negative convergence of various distress para-meters. Besides this, the widows of farmer suicides face invisibilities imposed by a patriarchal society, which are manifest as tradition, status, procedure, opportunity, value, ownership, and vote, as elaborated below:

One, *Tradition*: Widowhood does not return to the farmer's wife the control over her life, but merely transfers it to the family and community. Two, *Status*: Only when the widow conforms to rules of patriarchy is she rewarded with security and respect. Three, *Procedure*:



The state does not facilitate her empowerment beyond the stereotypes that keep her dependent, and fails to represent her rights and interests. Four, *Opportunity*: from an early age, a woman is denied education and employment, which limits the access of the widow to the outside world. Five, *Value*: Her work is not recognised, and the widow does not derive any financial freedom because of her labour. Six, *Ownership*: Despite laws, the widow has no claim on land and residences, which entrenches and maintains her dependence on the male, land-owning members of the family. Six, *Vote*: The widow is unrepresented and remains outside the promised rights of property, financial independence, and livelihood.

Also, there are several consequences of farmer suicides on the children of the households. Education is the first casualty of rural distress, which ironically, only further adds to it. The drop-out rate of students between 5-15 years is 60 percent in rural India. (*Source: GoI, 2017*). First, the education of school-going children, even if free as in case of Below Poverty Line families, becomes less important than survival. Second, this is especially so for girls, whose education at best is indifferently supported and subject to their reaching marriageable

age. The farmer suicide households cannot afford the investment' in the 'continued education of girls. Third, the eldest children, whether boys or girls, help their mothers with earning a livelihood and running the family after the farmer suicide. The children, therefore, turn overnight from school-going students to daily wage labour after the farmer suicide. Fourth, there is little or no chance of the children continuing with education beyond Class X, or acquiring any income-generating skill, due to lack of time and money. The study of such widows and households will be part of the *State of Working India, Report-2020* by the Azim Premji University, Bangalore, where a more elaborate description and analysis will be available.

In just the last three years, the Beed district of Maharashtra has faced 651 farmer suicides, highest for any one district in the country; that's 18 suicides per month in the 11 talukas of the district (*Source: SCRB*). Beed is 80 percent rural, where about 50 percent of women are cultivators more than men at over 46 percent, and more women work as farm labour at 37 percent than men at 24 percent (*Source: Census, 2011*). The per capita income of the district is much lower than the state average, and it is also low on human development





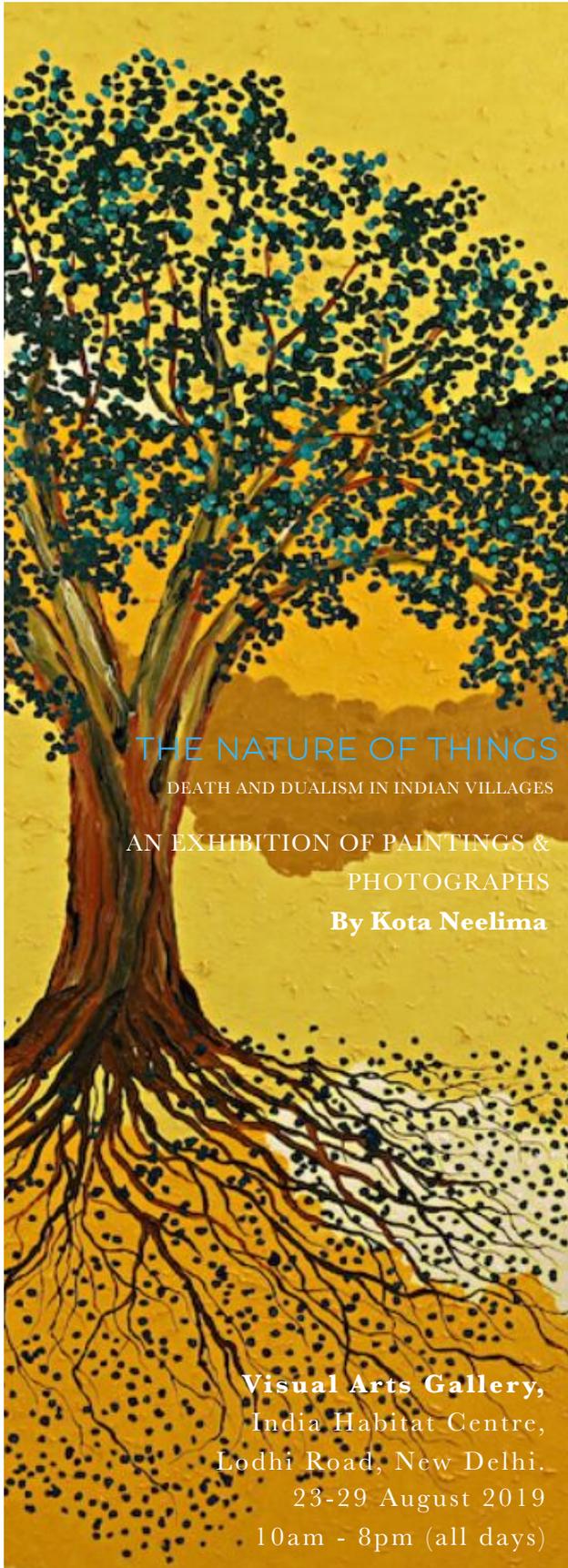
indicators. Bajra, cotton and wheat, and in some parts sugarcane, are the main agricultural crops, but drought has been a constant feature of the district since 2012, affecting all the talukas.

The life and death in the villages of Beed is best represented through the stories of survival of the widows of farmer suicides. The painting and photo exhibition, *The Nature of Things*, by author, researcher and artist Kota Neelima, engages with the state of the farmer suicide households through a visual narrative, which contains over 50 photographs, all taken during conversations with the women survivors of rural distress. They not only represent the crisis in their own lives, but must be seen as symbols of the acute rural distress across the villages of India.

The paintings by the artist are inspired by the rural life and death in the worst-affected parts of the country, including Maharashtra. The paintings are the last memory of rural landscapes, and how the villagers remember their world. The works draw from the rural Indian's several imaginations of the Presence, and who must now reconcile with the Absence of everything. This duality is necessary for survival in the twilight between the present and the absent. A reconciliation with unmitigated poverty

and desperation is unavoidable, as one prepares to fight battles that are destined to be lost. No arguments of the higher Truth or the scientific Fact can reproduce a semblance of the Presence, whether of God or of the Government. Only nature is the witness of such long journeys, and the paintings (oil on canvas) borrow from the trees and skies of a vanishing rural India. The works are vibrant, energetic and optimistic; way the hope is imagined. The theme of the show is inspired from the Upanishads on the nature of the Self and the world in all its incompleteness and the unreconciled. The exhibition transposes this duality on the ground realities in Indian villages, and engages with the absolutes of distress and dualism through photographs and paintings.

As part of an effort for distress alleviation, the exhibition will endeavor to assist the families of farmer suicides through the earnings from the sale of the paintings. Part of the proceeds will go to the children of farmer suicide households to ensure they continue with their education or return to school in cases where they have dropped out due to the death of the farmer. The exhibition is being conducted through StudioAdda, which is an outreach initiative of the artist, as well as her studio in New Delhi. More at [www.kotaneelima.com](http://www.kotaneelima.com)



Dr. Kota Neelima is an author, researcher and an impressionist-abstract artist. She writes and researches on rural distress, farmer suicides, gender and poverty. She has a Ph.D in Political Science and has been a Senior Research Fellow, South Asia Studies at The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Johns Hopkins University, Washington DC.

For that past 15 years, Neelima's works have been displayed in several cities of India and abroad, and among her solo shows are, *First Cause* (2012), *What the Eyes Can See* (2015), *Places of Worship* (2017), *Metaphors of the Moon* (2018). Her works have been part of shows in several countries, and her latest solo show, *The Manifest Absence* (2018), was held at the Nehru Centre, London. Her works were displayed at the China Art Museum in Shanghai, and are part of the permanent collection at the Museum of Sacred Art, Belgium.

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**Visual Arts Gallery,**  
India Habitat Centre,  
Lodhi Road, New Delhi.  
23-29 August 2019  
10am - 8pm (all days)