



"The Dying Fields" **Film Transcript**

NARRATION:

It's June in Vidarbha, the planting season when the air is thick with moisture and anxiety. Will the monsoon come too early or too late for the finicky cotton crop?

NARRATION:

This used to be known as India's cotton belt. Now it's better known as the suicide belt.

NARRATION:

For the past four years, there's been a suicide reported here every eight hours. The women of Kohla village are mourning over the body of Durgasingh Chavan. Distraught over losing his land to a moneylender, this farmer swallowed a lethal dose of pesticide.

NARRATION:

A few miles away in Ganeshpur, another farmer killed himself, unable to cope with a 6,000-rupee debt, about 150 dollars. The men of his village have come to the cremation site to complete the final rites.

MAN:

He couldn't pay back his loans. His son's wedding was coming up. He was ashamed to show his face in the village.

FRED:

How many of them have loans that they have difficulty paying back? (All hands up)

NARRATION:

Vidarbha is a region of hilly forests in the middle of India, a land that is rocky but when the monsoon behaves, it is generous. About 3.2 million farmers here depend on cotton for a living. It's become a high-risk occupation.

NARRATION:

Urkuda Attaram shares a grinding routine tending her family's nine-acre farm with two sons and their recent brides. Like most of the 700 million people in India who live off the land, this family survives on less than two dollars a day.

URKUDA ATTARAM:

After doing work on our farm, I work on other farms. Only then can we afford food. We couldn't survive otherwise.

NARRATION:

For days, this family will clear the field as they prepare a bed for the cotton seeds.

URKUDA ATTARAM:

My legs hurt. My body aches. I just feel like going home and throwing myself on the bed.



"The Dying Fields"
Film Transcript

NARRATION:

She runs the family farm as well as the household – a juggling act she never anticipated.

URKUDA ATTARAM:

I used to only look after the home. He used to look after the fields.

NARRATION:

About a year ago, her husband, Dassaru, killed himself.

URKUDA ATTARAM:

I can't imagine why he did it. He ate well and went to bed. We don't know when he went to the farm. There was a small wooden canopy. He hanged himself there.

URKUDA ATTARAM:

He was very gentle and kind. We never used to fight.

URKUDA ATTARAM:

It's difficult to talk about him. I miss him a lot.

NARRATION:

At the time of his death, her husband owed money to the bank. Most farmers must borrow money to pay for seeds, fertilizer and pesticide. In India, that means bureaucracy. Urkuda Attaram can neither read nor write, yet she competes in a global cotton market, a world that drove her husband into despair over debt. Now it's her turn to take out a loan, and she sets out on a two-hour walk to the bank.

URKUDA ATTARAM:

I think of him all the time. I think that if he were here he would be working with our sons in the fields. Now I have to do it all.

KISHOR TIWARI:

Greetings. My name is Kishor Tiwari. (old woman gestures to say she can't hear anything)

KISHOR TIWARI:

Oh, you can't hear? It's better that way. Now you don't have to hear bad news.

KISHOR TIWARI:

Has any government officer come by?

OLD MAN:

No, no one has come.



"The Dying Fields" **Film Transcript**

NARRATION:

Kishor Tiwari comes from a well-to-do business family. He was trained as an engineer but the growing distress among farmers turned him into a full-time activist for them in the late 1990s.

NARRATION:

Tiwari is one of the first to get word of a suicide and his organization, the Vidarbha People's Protest Forum, meticulously records each death.

KISHOR TIWARI:

Thirty suicides in ten days.
Ten days. Thirty!

KISHOR TIWARI:

During my school days, it was a matter of pride to be a farmer. They used to have everything in their house, milk, money. They used to have a different lifestyle. Like the barber who cut their hair used to be given grain in exchange for unlimited haircuts, their laundry used to get done for free. I was a teacher's kid with seven siblings. I used to feel it's better being a farmer than having a job.

NARRATION:

Today, Vidarbha's farmers are drowning in debt. Government banks have loaned hundreds of millions of dollars to them, and default rates hover around 50 percent. Yet Tiwari wants new loans and complete debt forgiveness.

KISHOR TIWARI:

Why can't this happen?

CROWD OF PEOPLE:

It has to happen

KISHOR TIWARI:

Why can't this happen?

CROWD OF PEOPLE:

It has to happen

KISHOR TIWARI:

Freedom from debt

CROWD OF PEOPLE:

Must be provided



**“The Dying Fields”
Film Transcript**

KISHOR TIWARI:

Freedom from debt

CROWD OF PEOPLE:

Must be provided

KISHOR TIWARI:

When they began to purchase everything with money, their stability was shattered. Some say this was bound to happen. If progress can be achieved only at the cost of poverty, we need to reconsider if we should continue with this kind of progress.

NARRATION:

India has increasingly embraced free trade and has become a global player in information technology. Since 2002, India has had one of the world’s fastest growing economies.

But only images of this new prosperity have reached the impoverished rural areas where most Indians live, feeding consumer appetites completely at odds with the reality here.

WOMAN:

They don’t have electricity in the house, but they still want a cooler! They want a TV! Must have a TV! There is no place to sit in the house, but must have a sofa! They want a sofa! Where will we get the money from?

WOMAN:

We have to get our children married.

WOMAN 2:

We have to give \$2,500 as dowry.

VANDANA SHIVA:

No, this sickness has to be stopped.

WOMAN:

We can’t stop it.

WOMAN:

If we don’t, then we have to keep our daughters at home. They will tell you, ‘Keep your daughter at home.’

VANDANA SHIVA:

So when in your house your son gets married, do you ask for all these things?



"The Dying Fields" **Film Transcript**

WOMAN:

Yes!

VANDANA SHIVA:

Why?

WOMAN:

Everybody does. We have to get everything.

NARRATION:

Vandana Shiva is a prominent campaigner against the new global trade rules. She reminds local farmers that American cotton producers receive government subsidies.

VANDANA SHIVA:

There is a four billion dollar subsidy for U.S. cotton. When that cotton arrives in the market, prices drop.

NARRATION:

Shiva wants to see farmers planting their own farm-grown seeds again, instead of buying from commercial seed producers. Her organization distributes organic seed varieties to farmers.

VANDANA SHIVA:

It's wheat. Ancient wheat!

NARRATION:

She also urges farmers to grow more food crops and rely less on cotton.

VANDANA SHIVA:

It's called addiction, doing wrong things compulsively. It's like smoking, like drinking. It's addiction, isn't it? You have become addicted to Bt cotton.

NARRATION:

But Shiva's voice is drowned out amid noisy ad campaigns by seed companies. For centuries, farmers here grew their own seeds but since the 1970s, they've been vaulted into a world of commercially produced hybrids and, since 2002, genetically modified cotton seeds, known as Bt.

Bt cotton was patented by the U.S. company Monsanto – but it's marketed, vigorously, under various Indian labels.

NARRATION:

At this time of year, the seed salesmen are always in Vidarbha – more reliably than the monsoons.



"The Dying Fields" **Film Transcript**

SALESMAN:

We're trying to teach you about new technologies and breakthroughs in the field.

SALESMAN:

The difference between Bt cotton and other seeds is like the difference between a purebred Jersey cow and a regular cow.

SALESMAN:

Why do we buy a Jersey cow? Because we expect more milk.

SALESMAN:

If she receives the proper care, she'll yield the promised amount of milk.

NARRATION:

Bt promises pest resistance and better yields than the old seeds, but it's also more expensive. And its suitability to Vidarbha's growing conditions is debated. Bt does best under irrigation that only a minority of farmers here have.

Most growers in the region must rely on the rain gods.

A good monsoon can mean good yields, but a bad one could mean disaster.

NARRATION:

Hanjari Chavan can remember farming with his grandfather when they didn't need to buy seeds.

HANJARI CHAVAN:

In those days the seed was home-grown, you had to just till and sow, and the entire income from the crop was yours.

NARRATION:

Planting season for Chavan begins with figuring out how to pay for his seeds. So he's come to the government-run bank.

BANK MANAGER:

How much do you want now?

HANJARI CHAVAN:

About \$3,700.

BANK MANAGER:

Let's see what we can do.



**"The Dying Fields"
Film Transcript**

HANJARI CHAVAN:

At least make it a little more so that it will be enough.

BANK MANAGER:

We can do about \$2,500.

HANJARI CHAVAN:

Only \$2,500? At least make it \$500 more.

BANK MANAGER:

All right, we'll do it.

HANJARI CHAVAN:

\$1,250 goes for the seeds, 600 for the fertilizer, about 250 goes to pay the laborers to sow and till. We also use pesticide spray. The money's not enough for this.

NARRATION:

About half of Chavan's bank loan will have to pay for Bt cotton seeds. He's more fortunate than many of his neighbors because part of his farm is irrigated.

SEED STORE OWNER:

20 percent of this area is irrigated. 80 percent is not. Even those who don't have irrigation demand Bt. I advise them not to buy, but they don't listen and they plant Bt anyway.

HANJARI CHAVAN:

Last year we used Bt and we liked it. So we'll use it this year also and see how it does.

NARRATION:

Last year after all his expenses Chavan says his income was about 1,200 dollars, which had to provide for an extended family of thirteen. This meagre income he blames on steadily declining cotton prices.

NARRATION:

The price Chavan got for his cotton at last season's market was down 25 percent from the year before, even as seeds, fertilizer and pesticide went up. The government safety net that once kept cotton prices closer to the cost of production – has all but disappeared.

Under India's new free trade policies, Vidarbha's farmers – most of them small land holders – must compete in a global market that includes formidable, often subsidized rivals, including American cotton farmers.



"The Dying Fields" **Film Transcript**

HANJARI CHAVAN:

Of course I'm worried. I've taken a large loan. Many things can happen, marriages or a sudden illness, which require money. Then the situation becomes worse. When we need more money, we pawn our utensils and other things to run the household. I'll probably need about \$1,250 more.

NARRATION:

Chavan is hoping he can avoid resorting to a private moneylender to tide him through harvest in December. Unlicensed lending businesses are illegal, but they are everywhere, as lucrative as they are invisible.

MONEY LENDER:

They do it behind the doors of legal businesses like grocery stores.

NARRATION:

This man, a grocer, was willing to appear on camera. He says he was a lender until his conscience forced him to quit.

MONEY LENDER:

The farmers borrow money for farming or for their daughters' marriages. They have a lot of problems for which they need money. They don't get money from the banks very easily. With moneylenders, they just walk in with a stamp paper and walk out with the money.

NARRATION:

Stamp paper is often used in financial contracts. Farmers sign or place their thumbprint on blank forms, risking the possibility that lenders will later take over their land.

MONEY LENDER:

The newspapers keep carrying stories that say: stop the money lending business, farmers are committing suicide. Because of this negative publicity some lenders have stopped operating.

MONEY LENDER:

I feel for them, that's why I shut down completely but many of my friends are in this business; no one has got a license. If some officers come to ask questions, these guys bribe them with 50 bucks and get rid of them.

NARRATION:

The dimly lit poison ward of the government hospital is where many disputes with moneylenders end up.



"The Dying Fields"
Film Transcript

DOCTOR:

Commonly we see this organic phosphorous poisoning, because most of these people - they are farmers so they have ample insecticides.

DOCTOR:

We have eight beds here. So all the times they are occupied.

FRED:

All the eight beds are always occupied?

DOCTOR:

Yes, yes, yes.

NARRATION:

Even bed sheets are a luxury here. It's one more gauge of the precarious financial and social predicament of farmers like Vitthal Manchalwar.

Manchalwar's suicide attempt hit the front page of the regional newspaper because he'd blamed a local electrician who has become notorious as an unlicensed moneylender.

If the Manchalwar family sticks with this story, it could mean legal trouble, even jail for the alleged lender.

The electrician's wife has come to the hospital. She and Manchalwar's wife argue about what to tell Wide Angle's reporter - and the police - to explain why Manchalwar took poison.

SUMAN GAIKWAD:

Tell them that he had a bank loan, that's why he did it.

MRS. MANCHALWAR:

No, it's not the bank loan. Your husband asked him to sign papers and forfeit the land. That's why he did it.

SUMAN GAIKWAD:

He never asked him to sign anything away. Tell them this was because of domestic problems.

MRS. MANCHALWAR:

He was worried about his land. That's why he did it.

SUMAN GAIKWAD:

That's not true. Don't listen to this woman. She is not in the right mind.



"The Dying Fields" **Film Transcript**

NARRATION:

Our camera crew leaves the hospital and returns an hour later. They find more members of the alleged moneylender's family gathered around Manchalwar's bed.

FRED:

We are sorry to interrupt, but what's going on?

PANDIT:

Your camera and your mic are disturbing us.

FRED:

Do you belong to this family? Are you relatives?

PANDIT:

Yes. I belong to the same village. That's why I am here, to help them.

FRED:

To help them?

NARRATION:

In fact, he is the son-in-law of the alleged money lender. And Manchalwar's son says the visitors came not to help but with a threat.

HANUMANGLU MANSHALWAR:

They said they'll get him beaten up by the police when he is released.

NARRATION:

Vitthal Manchalwar stirs from his sickbed. He says he borrowed money to marry his son and daughter last year, and when he couldn't pay back the last 750 dollars, the lender said he would take almost half his land.

VITTHAL MANCHALWAR:

This land has been with me since I was born. I haven't given it to anyone. I thought, What's the point of living? So, I drank the poison.

NARRATION:

Local officials urge farmers to avoid moneylenders with some simple night time entertainment.

SKIT:

Hey Bhimya, where are you?

Who's there?

Me, I'm your lender

Sir, you have come here today



"The Dying Fields"
Film Transcript

but I have nothing to repay you
Don't tell me that now!

MUSICIAN:

My brothers, we have to defeat the lenders now
We can't be committing suicides now
We heard many stories about suicide now
I tell you, one who feeds this country will not lose

NARRATION:

But the overall suicide rate in Vidarbha has not declined. In the first six months of 2007 alone, more than 500 farmer suicides have been reported.

NARRATION:

Durgasingh Chavan drank pesticide after he had a bitter dispute with a moneylender. The large crowd mourning him attests to his status as a respected man in the village. As often happens in Vidarbha, Chavan's life began to unravel with the costly impending marriage of his daughter.

SHYAM CHAVAN:

My father borrowed \$750 from Rohidas Rathod and after the wedding my father paid him 750 plus another 750 making it \$1,500.

NARRATION:

But 100 percent interest was not enough, the Chavans say. They claim the lender then falsified title papers and sold their land to someone else.

SHYAM CHAVAN:

The man was going around town saying this is my land now. That's how we found out the land is no longer ours.

NARRATION:

Chavan filed a lawsuit, and his family says the moneylender threatened to kill him unless he dropped it. Now Chavan's son has returned to the police station where his father had complained repeatedly of harassment. The Chavans say the police have always sided against his family.

SHYAM CHAVAN:

Last time he beat us up and the bastard took bribes!

BYSTANDERS:

Don't swear, don't swear.



"The Dying Fields"
Film Transcript

INSPECTOR:

Don't worry about anything. Be calm. I'll look into it.

NARRATION:

This time the police promise to arrest the accused and his accomplices on charges of provoking suicide, a crime under Indian law.

INSPECTOR ANIL KINGE:

Write this down. We'll do our best to arrest all seven culprits as quickly as possible, and they will be arrested soon.

SHYAM CHAVAN:

They will be arrested.

INSPECTOR ANIL KINGE:

Okay, they will be arrested. Stamp the warrant.

Picture taking...

NARRATION:

The president of India is coming to Vidarbha. Farm activist Kishor Tiwari has secured a face-to-face meeting for a group of widows. He's come to take their pictures for security passes.

KISHOR TIWARI:

(to woman) Come, we'd like to take your photo.

(to photographer) Come, take her photo.

KISHOR TIWARI:

No, just you. It's for your pass.

You could go in my car to Yavatmal.

KISHOR TIWARI:

The majority of India's population lives in its villages. It means that governments are elected by the votes of the rural citizens. But still in our history of 60 years, nothing has been done for them. Our budget allocates just 4 to 5 percent toward the rural economy.

KISHOR TIWARI:

We want to take your photo. Come over to the light.

KISHOR TIWARI:

How much milk does this buffalo give?



"The Dying Fields" **Film Transcript**

WOMAN:

Two liters.

KISHOR TIWARI:

Farmers are committing suicide. Farmers have a lot of troubles. What should the president do? Should he give buffalos to all the farmers?

WOMAN:

They should raise cotton prices.

KISHOR TIWARI:

Raise cotton prices! Wow.

NARRATION:

It was a backlash from rural voters that turned out India's previous government in 2004. When the new prime minister, Manmohan Singh, took office, he promised to relieve their suffering. But overall government spending in rural areas has not changed appreciably, despite a 900 million dollar relief package announced for Vidarbha in 2006.

ANNOUNCER:

If you want to enjoy this auspicious occasion, come in the tent or you'll miss the fun.

NARRATION:

Mass weddings like this are one government initiative.

These events are often organized in partnership with private charities.

SUBTITLE:

Congratulations.

NARRATION:

They save farming families the crushing expense of a wedding.

ANNOUNCER:

With the blessings of Gajanan Maharaj and Lord Buddha...

NARRATION:

In this ceremony, nine hundred couples exchange vows. And each pair receives about 300 dollars which is used to offset the dowry burden of the bride's family – which can be several times a typical family's annual earnings.

NARRATION:

But even here the government is criticized for not helping, as it once did, where it counts most.



"The Dying Fields"

Film Transcript

GROOM:

The government's low cotton rates are the problem. We don't get the right prices. Growing cotton requires a lot of money. The government has made us poor.

NARRATION:

The government is also widely blamed for ineffectual and poorly implemented programs. For example, local officials learn that many couples in one recent communal wedding were already married.

SUDHIR GOEL:

And what about complaints of fraud? Are you really conducting inquiry?

GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL:

Yes, sir. In one case 700 marriages were conducted on March 19th on Gudi Padwa. We found that out of 154 cases that we investigated, 140 couples already had up to four children each.

SUDHIR GOEL:

140!

GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL:

So we didn't issue any checks to them

NARRATION:

Durgasingh Chavan's family has brought his body to the morgue for the required autopsy. The moneylender who allegedly swindled him is still at large. Until he is caught by the police, the family refuses to take the body back for the final rites.

HEMANT CHAVAN:

We'll give the body to the government. That's how we feel. Either give us justice or take the body.

NARRATION:

Exhausted, grieving and bowing to tradition that requires a prompt funeral, the Chavans, in the end, relent and accept the body.

NARRATION:

President Abdul Kalam is making his first visit to Vidarbha of his five year term. It is the 50th birthday of a local college that drew him – not the farm crisis – a fact that has not escaped the notice of activist Kishor Tiwari.



"The Dying Fields"
Film Transcript

KISHOR TIWARI:

I asked him to at least talk to the widows. I felt that we have such a burning issue here and the president is coming for a college silver jubilee function and will make some useless comments there.

NARRATION:

In India the prime minister, not the president, makes policy. But as head of state, the president can highlight issues, if he desires. Across town, Tiwari waits with the widows to present his demands to the president.

ANNOUCER:

The program is over.

KISHOR TIWARI:

Don't smile too much. This is a serious issue.

KISHOR TIWARI:

These are the widows of the farmers who have committed suicide in Vidarbha. These are the representatives of the 4,000 widows of those who've committed suicide in last four years.

PRESIDENT:

Blanket ban on Bt cotton?

PRESIDENT:

Where do you want that...

PRESIDENT:

One minute.

Where do you want the blanket ban on Bt cotton?

PRESIDENT:

It gives more yield.

KISHOR TIWARI:

No sir, let me speak, sir. This is a rain-fed area. In a rain-fed area, the results of the Bt cotton are mixed.

PRESIDENT:

I want to ask you two questions. There's a prime minister assistance package and the Maharashtra government package. I want to ask you, how much are you benefiting out of this?



"The Dying Fields"
Film Transcript

SUBTITLE:

Sir, I'll say it in Marathi. He will translate.

WIDOWS:

We have not benefited. Nothing has reached to any farmer.

WIDOWS:

Please forgive our loans, sir. Please forgive our loans, sir.

PRESIDENT:

Loan waiving is there already.

PRESIDENT AND KISHOR TIWARI:

On interest waiving.

PRESIDENT:

You want loan waiving?

KISHOR TIWARI:

And you can do it? At least you can ask, sir, under article 78.

PRESIDENT:

I'm meeting all the state officials today, after this. Definitely I will discuss your problems, okay? I will go through this, what is the action needed and tell them.

NARRATION:

Leaving Vidarbha, the president urges local officials to redouble their efforts to help widows like the ones he'd just met.

A month after the visit, President Kalam's term in office expired.

KISHOR TIWARI:

We have tried our level best to focus the issue before the nation and the international media. We are not optimistic regarding anything. They are the bureaucracy.

NARRATION:

Urkuda Attaram has finally reached the bank. She's in good standing thanks to the government-issued widow compensation of 750 dollars.

URKUDA ATTARAM:

I paid off my husband's loans. With the rest I bought some seeds, some clothes, some millet, oil and salt. There was still some left, which I used for my son's wedding.



"The Dying Fields" **Film Transcript**

NARRATION:

Today she borrows 350 dollars, which she will use to buy Bt seeds.

NARRATION:

Now it's time to pray, to plant, to worry.

Like most Vidarbha farmers, this family has no irrigation, no insurance against the often erratic monsoons.

NARRATION:

This downpour is a promising start to the new season but it will take repeated rainfall over the months ahead to assure a good harvest in December.

NARRATION:

Vitthal Manchalwar has returned home from the hospital and except for occasional seizures and blurred vision says he feels well. Since the hospital showdown with the moneylender's family, he's changed his story.

VITTHAL MANCHALWAR:

I have no loan from him now. When I calculated, it was all even. I don't owe him anything now. There's no problem. Under the influence of alcohol, I drank poison. But it's all over now.

NARRATION:

Manchalwar's finances are more precarious than ever. He's late with planting and in default at the bank. So he's looking for a private moneylender – again.

HANUMANGLU MANCHALWAR:

There were so many lenders in the village who used to give me money. But they've all stopped giving.

VITTHAL MANCHALWAR:

Now there is nobody because I took poison. They said see what he has done.

TIWARI VO:

Yesterday, while the president was here talking to us, three farmers committed suicide. The day before his arrival, another three farmers committed suicide.

I say this with conviction. This is a human rights violation. It's a mass genocide of farmers. This is why the government is on the witness stand.

NARRATION:

Kishor Tiwari hopes to some day be a voice in India's parliament for Vidarbha's farm crisis. He's run twice before without success.



"The Dying Fields"
Film Transcript

KISHOR TIWARI:

City people don't understand the problems of rural Vidarbha or rural India. Even I don't know what's going to happen here. I know that some of the demands I make are not feasible.

KISHOR TIWARI:

As leaders of the farming community, we are a failed lot, we are broken. We cannot save our farmers, cannot show them the way. We are a group of defeated leaders.

NARRATION:

Today, the Chavan family returns to the land they have lost, bringing 53-year-old Durgasingh Chavan on his final journey to the three-and-a-half acres he called home.

SHYAM CHAVAN:

He was quiet, always nice, very kind. He would never bother anyone.

My father lost his life for the farm. So as his children, we have to fight for it to bring it back to us. If we don't have a farm to live on, we'll end up as laborers.

NARRATION:

Laboring on other farms is a humiliation in a place where land ownership defines social status. Durgasingh Chavan's family is intent on getting justice and recovering their land – even though it could take years.

SHYAM CHAVAN:

We cremated him on the same land he fought for his whole life. But we never expected him to die for it.

NARRATION:

Since Durgasingh Chavan's funeral in June, over a hundred more farmer suicides have been reported in Vidarbha.