

## INTRODUCTION

As this book goes to print, life is slowly returning to normalcy in India following multiple waves of a debilitating pandemic that took the lives of more than half a million. Debates on the true extent of deaths notwithstanding, the pandemic infected above 40 million in the country and impacted lives and livelihoods across the globe. There is considerable uncertainty in Europe with the Russian invasion of Ukraine; political instability in neighbouring Pakistan with the ousting of the incumbent prime minister in a no-trust vote; mass protests following the economic crisis in Sri Lanka; strict lockdown in China as it grapples with another wave of COVID-19 outbreak; and inflationary pressures remain a concern worldwide amidst supply disruptions as recovery from the pandemic-induced recession had commenced. By contrast there is exuberance in the Indian financial sector, ‘unicorns’ are disrupting the market with their technological innovation and the initial public offering market spanning diversified industries is buoyant with unprecedented proceeds and a robust pipeline for the near future.<sup>1</sup> While most struggle to make sense of how the platform economy creates value or how the digital transformation has created nouveau dollar billionaires, a ‘crypto mania’ is sweeping through the country. Not surprisingly the Government of India has announced that it will issue a digital rupee as central bank digital currency and that incomes from crypto assets will be taxed. In stark contrast to the exuberance in the financial markets and the ongoing digital transformation, the farm sector has witnessed prolonged large scale agitation.

In an unanticipated move in November 2021, the Government of India repealed three controversial farm laws enacted in September 2020 that were at the centre of protracted protests by farmers: mostly from the north Indian states.

As agitating farmers and farmer unions demanded repeal of the farm laws and that the minimum support price (MSP) be made the legal guarantee as the floor price for all market purchases, the deep-rooted agrarian distress in regions such as Vidarbha in Maharashtra faded into oblivion as if those in crisis were unable to protest vehemently or end their lives tragically enough to draw media and policy attention. Of course, the issue of agrarian crisis has to be seen in the larger context of the changing structure of the economy and society. The underlying structural transformation of the economy has undoubtedly resulted in millions moving out of agriculture, and rising non-farm employment.<sup>2</sup> However, those who were unable to or unwilling to move out of agriculture face the idiosyncrasies of agriculture and its attendant worries—uncertainty, drudgery, loss, and indebtedness—season after season. For cotton farmers of the Vidarbha region in central India that has gained infamy for the spate of farmers' suicides, the 'record-high' prices in cotton this marketing season was accompanied by looming yield losses from excess rains in 2021 despite the season starting off with prospects of a 'good monsoon'.<sup>3</sup> So often do the erratic interplay between crop yields and prices of the output worry the farmers that losses attributed to them no longer surprise them as they either carry on with resilience and fortitude or give in to despair and fatalism. Policy uncertainties such as those around the implementation of the repealed farm laws or trade policies become a source of adverse fluctuations of farm incomes as well as a constant source of duress. That these routine struggles of the farmers and their households persist in the context of the narrative of a chronic agrarian distress raises several questions.

Is the crisis in Vidarbha agriculture a consequence of the stunted structural transformation of the economy? Is it an outcome of the deceleration in agricultural growth since the economic liberalization that began three decades ago? Why is it that despite years of state interventions the agrarian crisis continues unabated? Does the region's geography and climate predispose it to agrarian crisis? Have strong inclusive institutions failed to emerge in the region? If there is a protracted crisis, why do ginners and traders continue to throng the local cotton marts in hordes year after year to procure cotton? Is there indeed a crisis in Vidarbha or is it make-believe orchestrated by the media, politicians, farm activists, academics, and policymakers? What are the experiences of Vidarbha's cotton farmers amidst the din and roar? Why, despite all the stress and anxiety associated with growing cash crops such as cotton, do the farmers continue to grow cotton?

In this book, we attempt to answer these questions and investigate the affinity of farmers in the region to cotton despite the overarching evidence on

its complicity in the agrarian crisis. This book is a penetrating examination of the twists and turns in the fate of the region rooted in the ‘accidents’ affecting generations of farmers in the region who have engaged with the ‘gamble’ in cotton cultivation as the economy and society has transformed. It aims at unravelling a deeper understanding of the region’s cotton economy that is enmeshed in the history of the region and that of regions far from it. It also examines why it has not been easy to let go of the commodity that has pushed many to ruination and, as contemporary evidence indicates, forced thousands to committing suicide because of the complex interactions associated with growing the crop. We posit that the several historical ‘accidents’ that we throw light on institutionalized the ‘gamble’ with cotton in a region whose heterogeneities have been understudied despite its importance in the domestic and global cotton economy. These accidents primarily took the form of radical institutional changes and integration of global economy and local markets in the building blocks of present-day Vidarbha in the colonial period—Berar and the Central Provinces. Present-day Vidarbha became an important source of raw cotton to feed the mills of Lancashire before and after the American Civil War during 1861–1865. While indigenous raw cotton varieties—*desi kapas*—had been grown in the region for millennia, the transition to highly commercialized farming using *hirsutum* varieties occurred in the colonial period, hybrid cotton since the 1970s, and genetically modified cotton over the past two decades—Bt cotton—all became gambles that generations of crisis-ridden farmers became party to. The agrarian transition left no section of the rural population untouched as social institutions also transformed with the inveterate economic changes. In pre-colonial India, the accidentality in this agrarian transition is attributed to institutional changes that accompanied changing political fortunes, and during the colonial era, to the colonial state transforming local institutions, fostering railway expansion, persistently introducing new varieties, and several other measures. Even before the colonial agenda for cotton expansion, institutional changes and political instability over centuries influenced the socio-economic development of the region. The period of interest traverses the influence of the Delhi sultanates, the Bahamani sultanates, the Mughals, the Marathas, and colonial rule in the pre-independence era. In the post-independence era, the accidentality is ascribed to the introduction of high input intensive systems of production espoused in the Green Revolution, and the introduction of Bt cotton, among several others. Viewed through this lens, cotton in Vidarbha is a legacy that has passed on over generations; transferring the traits of its deep link

with capitalism and imperialism that goes beyond national boundaries and involvement of diverse set of stakeholders.

This book is an account of how hope frequently gives way to despair if farmers are unable to earn enough to pay off their debt and meet major consumption requirements. It is a chronicle of the struggles to make ends meet with whatever remains after repaying the debt partially or totally so that they save enough, spend enough, invest enough, and survive enough to repeat the same another season. In this book we document the struggles of farmers as they navigate the country's economic development and of which they are an integral part. In doing so, we bring to light the routine adaptation of farmers to changes in the economy, markets, environment, and politics. Surprisingly, how the story of risk and vulnerability of the farmers of Vidarbha have panned out over centuries has not been narrated to the extent that the enormity of the crisis warrants. An important facet of this story is the resilience and enterprise of the Vidarbha farmers so that the gambles with cotton can also be interpreted as the performance of 'cotton specialists'. That the cotton specialists routinely navigate high-stake risks in a production system that is the consequence of historical accidents and that institutional reforms do not necessarily mitigate risks for the farmers as they gamble with cotton is the core subject of this book.

Through the body of evidence and arguments presented in this book, we posit that there is a need to reimagine the story of cotton farming in the region in a manner that recognizes the bets that the farmers wager in the context of the interplay of capital, institutions, and nature. Historically, upheavals and disturbances far away have been the hallmark of being a cotton grower in the region. For centuries, cotton growers have been exposed to booms and busts of cotton, the vagaries of monsoon, and the uncertainties of the prices. Successive governments at the centre and the state have intervened to support in the form of agricultural input subsidies, procurement of produce at MSP, debt waivers, and several other programmes and schemes. However, the past three and a half decades have been unforgiving for the region's cotton farmers. What went wrong? Why have policies, programmes, and schemes been unable to alleviate the woes of the farm sector? Why have civil society organizations' efforts to sustain farm livelihoods not worked? Why do farmers continue to end their lives despite the concerted efforts to address agrarian distress?

In this book that was conceived as an attempt to articulate the complexity of risk and vulnerability in Vidarbha cotton, we present two core arguments.

First, we argue that it is necessary to locate the antecedents of institutions and agrarian conditions in historical circumstances in the distant past. That these events were beyond the anticipation or control of the generations of cotton farmers, renders them accidental. Second, we characterize the gambles of Vidarbha cotton farmers owing to them routinely undertaking risky production and marketing decisions in a high-stakes environment. That farmers' ex ante and ex post management of risks is situated in the context of multiple market failures is testimony to them being fundamentally similar to entrepreneurs in the formal sector. However, unlike the formal sector entrepreneurs, the odds are egregiously stacked against the cotton farmers. In the absence of fall-back options or cushions to absorb adverse income shocks, farmers have specialized in cropping patterns, developed agronomic practices, and relied on informal mechanisms that help them wager their bets repeatedly.

In part due to the insights from our engagement with farmers over a decade, and partly due to our frustration with limitations of top-down policies that ignore the insights from the field, this book proposes a 'people-centric' approach to developing agricultural policies and debating pathways of agricultural development. An important theme of the book is that merely focusing on the farmer and farm household as a producer and discounting the needs of the farmer and farm household as a consumer neglects their vulnerability. In doing so, it rests the case for accommodating the hopes, aspirations, and concerns of farmers in agricultural policy rather than simple production-centric target fixation like 'doubling agricultural credit', 'doubling farmers' income', or 'doubling the number of farmer-producer organizations', and so on.

Although the emphasis of the book is on cotton farmers of Vidarbha, we also present insights on the lives and livelihoods of agricultural labour households and comment on the scope of non-farm activities in augmenting household incomes. Furthermore, in the light of the political economy considerations shaping the role of the state in agricultural development, it argues for the need to deepen our understanding of unmitigated risks in agriculture as well as the vulnerability of agricultural households. We believe this is necessary for a critical assessment of the limitations of informal risk-management strategies and failures of existing formal risk-management structures in place to protect incomes of agricultural households. Taken together, the arguments presented in the book call for a reimagination of the market-based approach to risk management with an eye on the changing structures of society and economy.

One might wonder how we arrived at the title of the book. There is an anecdote that will help explain our choice of the book's title. During fieldwork in Wardha in 2015, we asked a farmer in his fifties about what he believed needed to change for the farmers to be satisfied with farming policies. He answered: 'Sheti sodun dhya' (Give up farming). The bemusing response was followed by the farmer proudly showing us the packets of a new brand of Bt cotton seeds that he said he had never used earlier. Upon asking why someone utterly frustrated with policies and farming would be exuberant while displaying the seeds which were likely to add to his woes, his response baffled us even more than the earlier response: 'Kahinna romanch avadoto' (Some like the thrill). His emotive responses about cotton or the cotton seeds notwithstanding, it made us ponder over the possibility of the 'thrill' associated with cotton growing.

In a region where generations of cotton growers have risked their assets and lives in growing cotton; a cash crop that has irrefutably shaped the world in more ways than one, it was not surprising for us that while conducting an opinion poll to name a board game Gaurav had designed to simulate riskiness in production in Vidarbha, the most popular response was 'Baazigar' (Gambler). It was on that day that we decided if we ever wrote a book based on our work in Vidarbha, it would refer to this 'Gambler' as a mark of our work's dedication to those who are routinely gambling by undertaking cash crop production in a high-risk environment year after year. There are however fundamental conceptual distinctions between a gamble, bet, and lottery that we will delve into while describing how cotton farmers qualify to be gamblers.

Regarding the 'Accidental' part of the title, we have long held the view that the importance of historical accidents in the story of cotton in Vidarbha is understudied. Furthermore, the history of the Vidarbha region itself is not completely understood; even among administrators, academics, journalists, policymakers and the protagonists of the book—the farmers. The contemporary discourse on agrarian crisis and rural distress explains the crisis through developments in the recent past. There is limited engagement with agrarian history of the region which has been the epicentre of agrarian crisis and long before that, the stage of major geopolitical upheavals. Therefore, we dug deeper into the region's history from archival and secondary sources with the hope that there may be clues in the region's history that might explain how it became a major centre for global cotton supply. Our primary obsession with the region's history arose out of our interest in figuring out

how institutions and markets evolved in the pre-colonial and colonial periods. This is not to suggest that there was a lack of design or deliberation on part of the rulers, state or forces beyond the region in these transformative changes. Rather the emphasis on the unfolding of history foregrounds the lives of farmers for whom these changes were mostly unanticipated and external. Although there were elements of design in policies and stakeholders anticipated upheavals to a certain extent, for the protagonists of our story, that is cotton farmers of Vidarbha, the events of interest retained attributes of accidents. Indeed, how farmers responded to the changes exemplifies their agency albeit with considerable temporal and spatial variation. The analytical approach in this book also does not undermine the commendable research that scholars have conducted over the decades from their respective perspectives in the realm of agriculture, agrarian crisis, cotton, economic history, and other related themes that we delve into. In fact, much of our insights on the question of agrarian crisis as well as the region are informed by contemporary as well as historical scholarship.

### STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book is structured into two parts. In Part I (Chapters 1 and 2), we delve into the geography, political changes and reconfiguration of the territorial boundaries of Vidarbha from a long historical point of view. We stress on the need to distinguish between the history of Berar and Central Provinces that are building blocks of present-day Vidarbha, and examine the pre-colonial developments since the thirteenth century in particular and identify the major forces and institutional factors that influenced the circumstances in which the commercialization of cotton took place. We dwell on the veritable institutional changes that shaped not only the trade expansion but also agricultural development outcomes over time. By investigating the details of the colonial takeover of the region since the mid-nineteenth century, we give a sneak peek into the changes in institutions—particularly land revenue administration, property rights, traditional agrarian relations, credit markets and expansion of railways. The most significant historical event that we dwell on is the American Civil War that lasted between 1861 and 1865. Relying on colonial administrative records, limited archival materials, and secondary sources, we reconstruct the circumstances under which present-day Vidarbha's agrarian transformation occurred.

In Part II, we examine developments in relatively more recent history: over the past twelve years based on our primary research in the districts of Wardha and Yavatmal in Vidarbha. The task of Chapter 3 is to present the study design and characteristics of sample households in our longitudinal study between 2009 and 2021. The analysis over the next three chapters is based on the data from a pooled sample of households over the eight years (2009–2011, 2015–2017, and 2019–2020) and a panel data over the five years (2015–2017 and 2019–2020). For the sake of brevity, we have broken up the set of findings into three chapters allowing a comprehensive coverage of the underlying issues: cropping patterns, costs, and incomes (Chapter 4); dynamics of agricultural inputs in cotton cultivation (Chapter 5); and vulnerability of farm households by emphasizing the farm household as a unit of production as well as consumption (Chapter 6). In the last chapter of the book (Chapter 7), we conclude with a synthesis of the findings from both parts and articulate policy implications as well as our vision for the agricultural development of Vidarbha. Taken together, these chapters present a nuanced understanding of aspects of change and continuity in our narrative of the ‘accidental gamblers’ as individuals with elements of agency who routinely adapt to changing environment, markets, and policies. Through the body of evidence from the multiple rounds of surveys and fieldwork over the years, we raise questions on the nature of choice and agency as well as the lack thereof in the story of the persistence of cotton in Vidarbha.

Despite a rich heritage of the commodity and its inherent relationship with the narrative of agrarian crisis and farmers’ suicides, there is a dearth of detailed investigation on questions that have motivated our research. Given the primacy of a risky production environment and a chronic developmental backwardness of the region, the habitual act of growing cotton is essentially a gamble, but there are gaps in the literature in systematically characterizing the gambles. The fact that the gamble with cotton is an artefact of the historical accidents that we emphasize characterizes cotton farmers of Vidarbha as ‘accidental gamblers’—hence the seemingly dramatic title of the book. Furthermore, discerning readers who may have engaged with the discourse on agrarian crisis and farmers’ suicides would have observed that official statistics on farmers’ suicides is reported under ‘Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India’. Our reference to ‘accident’ is also an implicit reference to this artefact.

Our methodology allows for a critical examination of the narrative of agrarian crisis. Undoubtedly, the nature of cotton production has undergone



drastic changes compared to what it was over half a century ago. The real cost of cultivation has increased but real returns to cultivation have fallen, resulting in lower profitability. That farmers continue to increase the area allocated to cotton or at best make marginal reductions in response to changing prices or other sources of adverse variability in the region compels us to wonder if the characterization of agrarian crisis in Vidarbha is valid. That despite facing losses, sometimes multiple losses in a short period, farmers do not merely cultivate cotton but ‘perform’ all the new ‘tricks of the trade’ made available to them, raises questions about the oversimplified characterization of farmers in the region. By relying on research of primary and secondary historical materials, ethnography, and longitudinal survey data, we present a novel description of the journey of cotton in the region and how farmers adapted to it.

The set of findings from Part I and Part II underscores our hypothesis that there is an agrarian crisis in Vidarbha irrespective of how one characterizes it. We find that the crisis in Vidarbha is nested in the broader institutional, macroeconomic, and political economy forces that have not only been shaped by historical developments beyond the control of the farmers but also continue to shape history continually. By drawing attention to the major dimensions of risk and vulnerability, particularly agricultural production and price risks, we find that over the centuries, they have essentially remained unchanged while there are dimensions of change. For instance, the near-universal diffusion of transgenic seeds—Bt cotton—two decades since their commercialization is a clear break from the narrative of technological backwardness. However, emerging issues with Bt cotton’s ability to protect farmers against pink bollworm infestation and the growing issue of secondary pests suggests the inherent risks and uncertainties embedded in new technologies. The commoditization of agricultural inputs including seeds and fertilizers has intensified over time. Credit market imperfections and shift from dirigiste continue to have distributional impacts in the village economy. The abuse of soil health and groundwater resources persists unabated. In addition, income shocks are not fully insured, and level of awareness about formal insurance remains low. The COVID-19 pandemic also showed the multiple dimensions of vulnerability to covariate as well as idiosyncratic risks. The inability to garner labour resources to undertake sowing or weeding within a critical window continues to bother farmers while gendered division of labour persists despite structural changes in the village economy.

Our book situates the story of cotton in a region that has become the hotspot for the sordid manifestation of agrarian distress—farmers’ suicides. What went wrong in the story of cotton needs an examination from both its historical developments as well as the interplay of markets and policies that have shaped the fates of millions of cotton growers. We argue that the story of cotton in Vidarbha cannot be narrated in isolation from the history of Vidarbha as well as how Vidarbha cotton has been embedded in the global trends over centuries.

Our expectations from this set of arguments are modest. We hope that our conceptualization and empirical evidence contributes to the body of knowledge and the discourse of agrarian crisis. If there are solutions, it would be a source of joy. This book, although comprehensive in its assessment of the risk and vulnerability of Vidarbha cotton, is by no means all-inclusive. It is likely that there are historical materials and studies pertaining to several aspects of the complex systems under inquiry that we may not have referred to. All errors of omission and commission are ours. Usual disclaimers apply.

## NOTES

1. Unicorn refers to start-ups valued at 1 billion US dollars or higher. The number of unicorns has been on the rise in recent times. The technology start-up trends suggest an increasing reliance on the platform economy. Platform economy refers to a diverse set of businesses based on radical digital systems connecting buyers and sellers. Affordable internet services and smart phones have enabled the growth of the platform economy.
2. H. P. Binswanger-Mkhize, ‘The Stunted Structural Transformation of the Indian Economy: Agriculture, Manufacturing and the Rural Non-Farm Sector’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, nos. 26/27 (2013): 5–13.
3. S. Arya, ‘Cotton Rates at an All-Time High but No Bonus for Vid’s Farmers’, *Times of India*, 3 November 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/nagpur/cotton-rates-at-an-all-time-high-but-no-bonus-for-vids-farmers/articleshow/87495612.cms> (accessed on 20 November 2021).