



**thirteen**  
WNET NEW YORK

450 West 33rd Street  
New York NY 10001-2605  
www.thirteen.org

### press information

WITH AN EPIDEMIC OF SUICIDES SOWING DESPAIR ACROSS THE INDIAN COUNTRYSIDE, *WIDE ANGLE* REPORTS ON THE PLIGHT OF FARMERS LEFT BEHIND BY INDIA'S SOARING ECONOMIC BOOM

*The Dying Fields* Premieres Tuesday, August 28 At 9 P.M. As *WIDE ANGLE* Continues Its Sixth Season On PBS

It's planting season in Vidarbha, a region of hilly forests in central India. Vidarbha used to be known as India's cotton belt – now it captures headlines as its suicide belt. Facing a grim reality of crop failures, sinking global cotton prices and crushing debts, many farmers have been driven to despair. In 2006, 1,044 suicides were reported in Vidarbha alone – that's one suicide every eight hours. "This is a human rights violation," says farm activist Kishor Tiwari. "It's a mass genocide of farmers."

At a moment when India is enjoying record economic growth, *WIDE ANGLE* turns to the four million cotton farmers who have been left behind, struggling to survive on less than two dollars a day. *The Dying Fields* premieres Tuesday, August 28 at 9 p.m (ET) on PBS (check local listings). Award-winning journalist and correspondent Fred de Sam Lazaro produced and directed the film.

The film follows Tiwari, former businessman turned farmer advocate, whose tiny office in the heart of this cotton-growing region functions as the archive and watchdog of the suicide epidemic. Often the first to receive the call announcing a new death, his meticulous documentation of each suicide confirms the extent of the crisis. Tiwari is trying to raise public awareness and push the government to make these desperate farmers a priority. "The majority of



India's population lives in its villages," Tiwari explains. "But still in our history of 60 years, nothing has been done for them. Our budget allocates just four to five percent toward the rural economy."

Vidarbha farmers owe hundreds of millions of dollars to government banks, and default rates hover around 50 percent. Farmers frequently resort to illegal moneylenders who charge up to 100 percent interest. When farmers cannot pay back their debts, disputes even continue into the poison wards of hospitals. ***WIDE ANGLE***'s camera crew visits the hospital bedside of Vitthal Manchalwar, whose suicide attempt hit the front page of the local newspaper when he blamed a notorious unlicensed moneylender for threatening to take half his farmland over a \$750 debt. "This land has been with me since I was born," Manchalwar says. "What's the point of living? So I drank the poison."

The film includes a mass community wedding of 900 rural couples, where the government distributes \$300 gifts to each couple as a gesture toward relieving their financial burdens; traveling salesmen hawking genetically modified – and costly – cotton seeds that require irrigation that few Vidarbha farmers have; the last rites of a farmer who couldn't pay his debts; and a visit by then-president of India, A.J.P. Abdul Kalam, whom the farming widows beseech for help in convincing the government to forgive their debts. Yet despite their pleas for relief, Vidarbha's farmers continue to face life-and-death decisions this planting season as they compete in the global market place alongside heavily subsidized growers from America, China and Europe.

After the film, ***WIDE ANGLE*** anchor Daljit Dhaliwal will conduct an interview with Columbia University Professor Jagdish Bhagwati, author of the acclaimed book, *In Defense of Globalization*.

Award-winning producer/director Fred de Sam Lazaro has spearheaded the highly acclaimed *Made in China* series and the documentaries *Death of the Dream* and *Seth Eastman: Painting the Dakota*, broadcast on PBS. Since 1985, de Sam Lazaro has been a correspondent for

*The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, reporting on domestic and international issues. In 1999, he became a contributing correspondent for PBS's *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*.

For additional information and photography, visit [thirteen.org/pressroom/wideangle](http://thirteen.org/pressroom/wideangle) or [pbs.org/pressroom](http://pbs.org/pressroom).

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**WIDE ANGLE** is a production of Thirteen/WNET New York for PBS. Stephen Segaller is executive producer. Pamela Hogan is series producer. Andy Halper is senior producer.

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Thirteen/WNET New York is one of the key program providers for public television, bringing such acclaimed series as *Nature*, *Great Performances*, *American Masters*, *Charlie Rose*, *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, *Wide Angle*, *Secrets of the Dead*, *NOW With David Brancaccio*, and *Cyberchase* - as well as the work of Bill Moyers - to audiences nationwide. As the flagship public broadcaster in the New York, New Jersey and Connecticut metro area, Thirteen reaches millions of viewers each week, airing the best of American public television along with its own local productions such as *The Ethnic Heritage Specials*, *The Thirteen Walking Tours*, *New York Voices*, and *Reel New York*. Thirteen extends the impact of its television productions through educational and community outreach projects - including the *Celebration of Teaching and Learning* - as well as Web sites and other digital media platforms. More information can be found at: [www.thirteen.org](http://www.thirteen.org).

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Press Contact:

**Deirdre Branley**  
Thirteen  
212.560.3130  
[branley@thirteen.org](mailto:branley@thirteen.org)

**Gloria Park**  
Thirteen  
212.560.2063  
[parkg@thirteen.org](mailto:parkg@thirteen.org)