

AN ANALYSIS OF FARMER SUICIDES IN PUNJAB'S AGRARIAN ECONOMY

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Abstract

Traditionally agrarian, Punjab- the food basket of India exposes the problem of extremes rural insecurity judged through rising number of farmer suicides contradicting the prevalent narrative of one of the fastest- growing national economies in the world. Indian Government chose Punjab as site for Green Revolution in 1960s where its output increased manifold. Three decades later, without any alternative source of employment, the small and marginal farmers still pursued economically unsustainable agrarian practices of green revolution, while accumulating high debts finding solutions in suicide only. The rising suicide cases represent how unfulfilled socio-economic rights can fuel both inward and outward facing violence and insecurity. This article suggests that the government's lack of attention to the phenomenon seems to be root of social inequalities, structural marginalization and anxiety among farmers. An immediate and multi-staged response plan, combined policy changes by central and state government with guidance of society can only create a rural human security that is equitable, inclusive and lasting.

Introduction

India is an agrarian nation with about 60% of its population depending directly or indirectly upon agriculture for food, raw material and employment. The exports of primary produce earn valuable foreign exchange which can be used to import capital goods for development of industry and infrastructure. But agriculture in India is often attributed as gambling with monsoon due to its extreme dependence on monsoon. While the lack of monsoons leads to series of droughts as in 1960s hampers the success of farmers, similarly the excess of monsoon directly targets the pockets of Indian farmers too. The failure of these monsoons, lack of better prices, exploitation by middlemen have lead to series of suicides committed by farmers across India specially in Punjab.

Unable to afford sufficient amounts of the expensive inputs, small farmers found their holdings becoming relatively less profitable. Now, three decades later, the small and marginal farmers of Punjab trying to pursue environmentally and economically unsustainable agrarian practices, are accumulating high debt while lacking alternative sources of income. As a result, farmers, their unions, concerned NGOs and several academics conclude that agriculture has become proposition in Indian Punjab, the farming heartland of South Asia for generations.

With regard to Punjab, the centre-state relationship has been tumultuous- a separatist movement in the 1980s was suppressed mostly through extrajudicial police practices. The central government is not addressing the relationship between Punjabi farmers suicides and Central Government's agrarian policies. In fact, central government do not even recognize the suicide statistics from Punjab, though it finds other states as "suicide affected" where Maharashtra, Telangana, Karnataka occupying the top positions.

In present scenario, suicides among Punjab farmers have by all means become a public. This issue is no longer confined to isolated cases.

There is a need for an objective and systematic study of the incidence and causes of suicides in Punjab. Such cases expose the extreme rural plight that was shadowed by the prevalent narrative of "India Rising".

Research Objectives

The following objectives have been formulated for research:

- To find out the increase in incidence of farmer's suicide cases in Punjab particularly in last 20 years.
- To identify the main causes of the cases of suicides.
- To find out the relationship between farmer's indebtedness and suicide.

Methodology

In order to achieve above formulated objectives of the research study regarding farmers suicides cases in Punjab, the data has been drawn from secondary sources. The main sources of the data are as follows:

- National Crime Record Bureau 2014
- Punjab Police Statistics
- Census of India 2001 and 2011
- Report by Movement Against State Repression (MASR), an NGO working in southern Punjab.
- Situation assessment survey of agricultural households in India, a report by National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), 2014.

The Food Basket of India – Punjab

The state of Punjab, located in North West of India has earned title of bread basket is a complicated combination of old British colonial policies and subsequent post-colonial Indian government policies that followed partition of Punjab between India and Pakistan in 1947. Deriving its name from a well elaborated canal system 'Punj-aab' or five rivers is socio- culturally classified into three region- Doaba, which lies between rivers Satluj and Beas, Majha a land between rivers Ravi and Beas and the Malwa lying on south of river Satluj. The total area of the present Punjab is approximately 50362 km. The present Punjab comprises of 4 divisions, 22 districts, 77 tehsils, 78 sub-tehsils and 140 blocks. The major cities of Punjab are Ludhiana, Amritsar, Jalandhar, Patiala, Bathinda and Mohali.

The climate of the region is characterized by extreme hot and extreme cold conditions with average temperature ranging from -2 to 40⁰C (min/max) but can reach upto 47⁰C (117⁰F) in summer and -4⁰C in winter. Punjab has three seasons:

- Summer seasons (April to June), when temperature typically rise as high as 110⁰F.
- Monsoon season (July to September), when majority of rainfall occurs.
- Winter season (December to February), when temperature falls as low as 40⁰F.

The two third of food grains produced annually in India indicates fertility of plains. South-Western Punjab has combination of desert soil and sierozem soil indicating calcareous soil. The soil of central Punjab ranges from sandy loam to clayey .At present three main rivers Ravi, Sutlej and Beas flows through Punjab.

Agriculture During Independence

Agrarian debt existed in British times but colonial government's policy that is Land Alienation Act, 1900 was to protect Punjabi farmer over money-lender. On the eve of first plan, agriculture was in helpless and deplorable condition. Farmers were in heavy debt with small and scattered holdings. They neither had money nor the knowledge to use proper equipment, good seeds and chemical manners. In spite of the fact that over 70 percent of our working population was engaged in cultivation, the country was still not self sufficient.

New Agricultural Strategy – Green Revolution

Since the mid 1960's traditionally agricultural practices were gradually replaced by modern technology and farm practices in India. The green revolution has brought significant changes to Punjabi agriculture. Its success was dependent upon high yielding variety of seeds of wheat, rice, maize, jowar and bajra. But they needed much more fertilizer and irrigation. Farmers also began producing the water-intensive non-traditional rice crop in large quantities even though Punjab was and continues to be a primarily wheat-eating state. The farming system promoted by the Green Revolution was thus resource-intensive, while making Punjabi farmers heavily dependent on exterior inputs such as chemical fertilizers. The farmers soon started suffering from decreasing returns on high investments. Studies from 1980s showed that small farmers (2.5 to 5 acres) and marginal farmers (upto 2.5 acres) were not able to meet consumption needs with household income.

Suicide Cases on Land of Punjab

'Agricultural sector has performed remarkably well', declared the proud Union Finance Minister P Chidambaram in Parliament as he announced the Interim Budget 2014-15. The state of Punjab has been showcased as an Indian agricultural success story since the Green Revolution, which was the parcel of development initiatives undertaken by developed countries in the late 1960's and 1970's to aid developing countries in increasing their crop yield. Yet, since this time there has been a steady increase in the number of economically related suicides by Punjabi farmers.

Statistically speaking, the estimated agricultural GDP growth for the fiscal year of 2014-15 had grown to 4.6 percent compared to 4 percent in the last four years as per the budget. But still Punjabi farmer has increasing prone to suicides.

Movement Against State Repression (MASR) an NGO working in southern Punjab for past 2 decades confirms 1738 suicides in 91 villages of Punjab between 1988 and 2014. These 91 villages are from the major 2 sub divisions of Sangrur district. MASR reported atleast 50,000 suicides that have occurred across Punjab over the last five decades, although few regions remained unaffected.

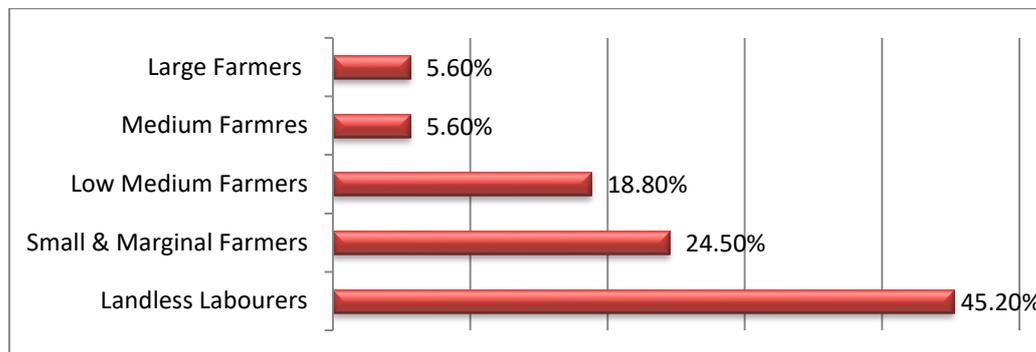
Also, a recent state Government commissioned report by Punjab Agriculture University reports 2890 suicides in two districts of Bathinda and Sangrur between 2000 and 2008 while the data was 1256 suicide cases in Bathinda and 1634 in Sangrur between 1990 and 2010. Another important source supporting the above estimates is by farmer's union, Bhartiya Kisan Union, estimated 90,000 suicides between 1990 and 2006.

Inderjit Singh Jaijee, Convener, founder of MASR who worked closely with families of farmers committing suicide states, "the unusual situation of the Punjabi farmer, known to be proud and self-reliant, resorting to suicide".

A first of its kind survey was carried out by Lokniti CSDS for Bharat Krishak Samaj holding over 11,000 interviews and 5,000 of them specifically with the head of the farmer household. Among those interviewed were 4,298 women and 2,116 youths. Around half of the farmers surveyed said the overall condition of farmers in the country is bad while only 15 percent said farmers are doing well. Although 83 percent of the farmers consider agriculture to be their main occupation, 32 percent of the farmers are forced to do work other than farming for additional household income. 67 percent of the women interviewed said that the income from agriculture is not sufficient to fulfill the needs.

The data suggests that there is approximately one suicide everyday and small farmers and agricultural labourers are the victims. Most of the estimates are based on incidence of suicides in Sangrur, Mansa and Bathinda districts. There are number of systematic studies being conducted in Punjab to cover all districts of the state to arrive at accurate estimate of such cases.

Fig.1 Estimates of suicides among various categories of farmers (in percent)



It is further brought out that majority of victims about 60.30 percent belonged to young in the age group of 15-29 years. 30.20 percent belonged to young persons in the age group of 30-44 years and 9.5% cases from age group above 45 years.

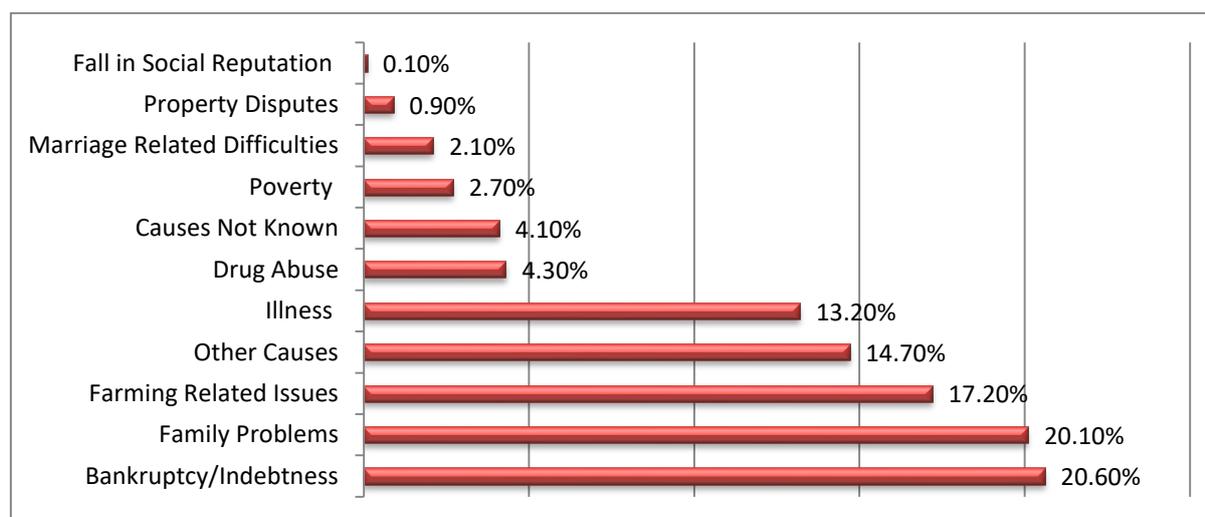
In Sangrur district, 738 farmers took fatal path to escape indebtedness while another 246 committed suicide for other reasons, the average amount standing against their name was Rs. 73,935. In Bathinda, the average outstanding due against farmer was Rs. 2.94 lakh and 550 farmers belonged to this group. For the workers the outstanding amount against their name was Rs. 47,347 on an average.

“The suicide graph has grown sharply between years 1997 to 2003 in cotton belt before BT cotton was introduced. In Sangrur and Bathinda, the two districts which saw one of the highest number of cases, no suicide has been reported after 2008”, says Dr. Sukhpal Singh of Punjab Agriculture University, Ludhiana who surveyed the main suicide hit six districts.

The large farmers here have above 15 acre land holding, 10-15 acre land with medium farmers, 5-10 acres of land holding with lower medium farmers and small and marginal farmers having 0-5 acre of land holding who are more suicide prone.

The statistics provided by National Crime Record Bureau suggested that 20.6% of deaths occurred in 2014 due to bankruptcy and indebtedness, 20.1% due to family problems, 4.3% related to drug abuse and only 0.1% because of fall in social reputation.

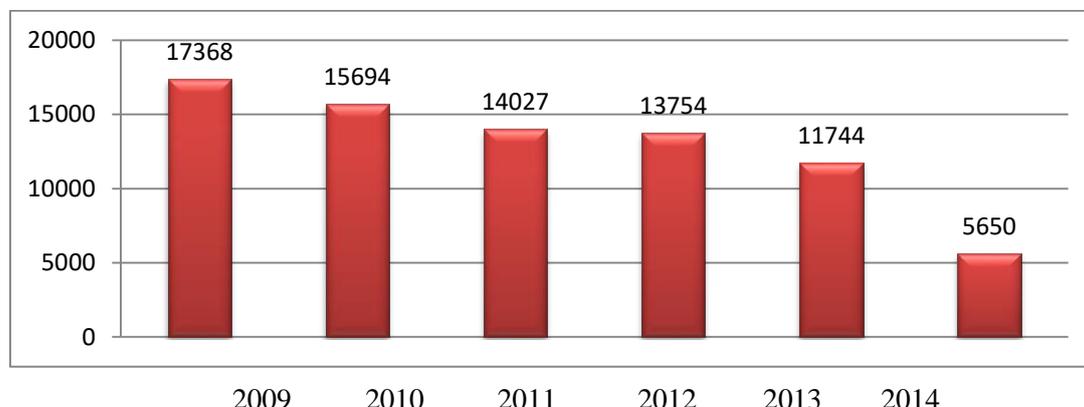
Fig 2: Causes of Farmers Suicides in Punjab



Source: NCRB Report, 2014

The data by National Crime Record Bureau, 2014 suggests the agricultural suicides between 2009-17. Year 2009 recorded 17368 deaths while number decreased to 14027 in 2011 and 5650 in 2014 reporting least number of suicide cases in Punjab.

Fig 3: Farmers Suicides in Punjab in 2009-2014



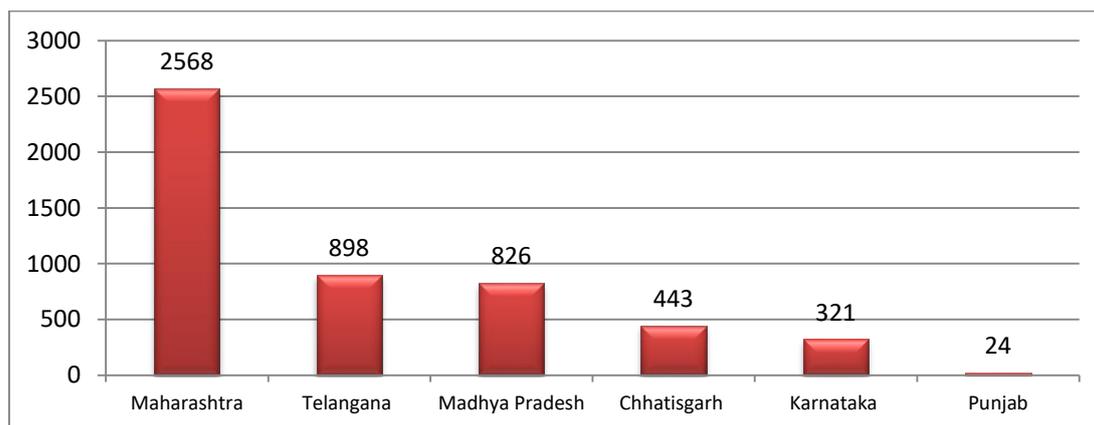
Source: NCRB Report, 2014

Whitefly destroyed two-third of Punjab's cotton crops, nearly 15 farmers commit suicide and causing estimated loss of Rs. 4200 crores in Malwa region in October 2015.

Punjab has nearly 12 lakh acres of land under cotton production and almost all of its Bt cotton is resistant to some major pests like bollworm. But over the years, whiteflies have regularly attacked cotton crop only to be controlled by intensive spraying of chemical pesticide. Despite new pesticide introduced and subsidized by state government, the whitefly attack spun out of control. Several cotton farmers of Bathinda and Faridkot districts of Punjab said that deficient rains seems to help whitefly to live longer.

Manjeet Singh, farmer of Singho village said, "Since July, we have sprayed pesticides 10-12 times. Each spray costs about Rs. 3300 per acre. But white was unaffected.

Fig 4: Farmers Suicides Cases in Various States in 2014



Source: NCRB Report, 2014

The report by NCRB, 2014 indicates maximum number of suicides in Maharashtra (2568) and least in Punjab (24) in year 2014.

Profile of suicide victims

A look at the profile of the farmers who committed suicide due to unseasonal rains reveals they are mostly marginal and small farmers, with had holdings up to five acres, who had taken additional land on lease at the rate of Rs. 30,000-40,000, a well-established practice in Malwa region of Punjab. This

is the same category of small and marginal farmers which accounts for 70 to 80 per cent of farmer suicides in general in government's long term farmer suicide data. Agriculture in Punjab suffers from mono-crop culture of mainly wheat and paddy. Variable costs increase due to rising prices of inputs like fertilizers, pesticides, weedicides, diesel etc.

Already intensive use of inputs along with cultivation of water-intensive crop like paddy has led to ecological crisis in terms of depleting water table and increasingly micronutrient-deficient soil. The National Sample Survey Organization has pointed out that farming has now become unremunerative for small and medium farmers. According to the Ludhiana-based Punjab Agricultural University (PAU), almost 64 per cent of the farmers own less than 10 acres. The above two facts imply that these 64 per cent small farmers will soon be the victims of the worsening agrarian crisis.

Plight of Family Members of Victims of Suicide

The surviving families of farmers who commit suicide are predominantly female. Women often become the sole supporters of families. These women, find themselves playing the new role of breadwinner and sustaining their families amidst extreme outstanding debt. Given the traditional Punjabi gender dynamic, women are even less likely to be formally educated than men and are unable to find alternative sources of employment. While most rise in the face of adversity to sustain their families, many remain deeply depressed and in a state of desperation. Some younger widows re-marry within the in-laws' family, while others abandon the family in fear of not being able to survive in the traditional joint family system without a husband.

Suicides also result in despair for elderly parents who depended on their farmer sons to care for them in their old age. According to MASR, the elderly display signs of deteriorating health, including depression. Children in suicide-affected families are also particularly at risk. Most of the children were reported to take very little to no interest in education. MASR notes several schools in area where up to 300 students are being taught by one teacher. Yet even this minimal training often becomes inaccessible to children from suicide affected families. Finally, there have been some reported cases of children forced into bonded labor, since the family has no other way to pay off the money-lenders.

Causes of Suicide

Suicide is a complex process. It arises out of an amalgamation of factors, hence we cannot attribute a single reason for suicide. But as far as Punjabi farmer is concerned the main reason is rapid rise in debt

High correlation between indebtedness and suicide proneness

TABLE 1. Estimates of total indebtedness of farmers in Punjab ,2012-13

DESCRIPTION	DEBT(Rs. Crores)	PERCENTAGE
Total debt on Punjab farmers	22943	100.00
Total productive debt	13158	57.35
Total non-productive debt	9785	42.65
Total institutional debt	14080	61.37
Total non-institutional debt	8863	38.63

About 57% of the total debt was taken for productive purposes and it amounted to Rs. 13158 crores. Although the banking sector is well developed in Punjab with total of 5035 bank branches out of which 2729 are commercial and 804 are co-operatives (Government of Punjab, 2012) still only about 89% of farmers have bank accounts and deals with banks active.

The recent report of National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) report titled, 'Situation Assessment Survey of Agricultural Households in India' is based on countrywide survey of 35000 households states that 52% of total agricultural households are in debt. The average debt is Rs. 47000 per agricultural household in this country, where the yearly income from cultivation per household is Rs. 36972.

Purpose-wise debt report explains that 57% of credit was taken for productive purposes like purchase of farm inputs, farm machinery and agricultural land. This portion was high among small farmers (67.87 per cent) followed by medium (59.61 percent), semi medium (58.05 per cent), marginal (55.47 percent) and large farmers (40.80 percent). The non-productive purposes including housing loan, consumption loan, health care have been 42.6 percent share in total loan.

The Cruel Arhtiyas

Cooperative societies provide short-term formal loans for seasonal agricultural expenses, but for expenses like motor burn-outs, installation of a submersible pump (which may cost upto Rs. 3 lakh), and even various household expenses farmers have to depend upon arhtiyas because of urgent need and easily availability of loans at any time of the day. The farmers who take land on lease for cultivation also have to bear the extra cost of rent of land. Since loans cannot be obtained from formal sources against land obtained on lease, once again these farmers have to rely on informal sources like arhtiyas and accept loans at exorbitant rate of interest (18 to 36 per cent) on exploitative conditions.

PDS Leakages

Many farmers are unaware of the minimum support price. And, often, these farmers resort to distress sale of their produce to clear the loans from moneylenders, obtained at exorbitant interest rates. In collusion with unscrupulous local traders and commission agents, government agencies delay procurement of grains by, in some cases, as many as 50-60 days. The poor end up spending more than 50 per cent of their meagre farm income buying food for mere subsistence, while the government procured grain in the FCI godowns finds its way into the hands of corrupt officials, middlemen and grain traders.

Punjab and Central government

The central government continuous to be accused of “step-motherly treatment” towards Punjab. The following instances proves the statement:

- The Central Government has recognized farmer suicides in other Indian states and provided compensation packages, but Punjab has received a disproportionately smaller piece of the relief pie. In 2008, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh awarded a 71,000 crore relief package (debt waivers) for Indian farmers- Punjab received only 0.75 percent of this package .
- The State Government’s response to civil society pressure around the issue of farmer suicides has been to question NGO statistics and authorize alternative research by other agencies. However, such authorized research is often delayed and arguably biased.
- Government officials typically accuse the villages of drug addiction, over-consumption, mismanagement, and lying. Villagers fear seeking help from State officials since they are often accused of causing the suicide, which is a crime under the Indian Penal Code.
- Agriculture is part of the “State List”. Nevertheless, several other Constitutional provisions (see Article 246) allow the Central Government to intervene in agricultural matters when they are in the “national interest” like setting the Minimum Support Prices (MSPs) .In 2008 the BhartiyaKisan Union (BKU) calculated the cost of production of paddy (rice) as Rs. 1810 per quintal while the MSP was Rs. 930 per quintal. The State Government can only raise concerns about the limitations of MSPs, but cannot actually change the MSP.

Recommendations

A swift and holistic policy changes accompanied by civil society action for societal change needs to be done for urgently solving the problem of farmer suicide in Punjab

More compensations to the family of farmers who committed suicide:

Known the plight of surviving family members and disturbing phenomenon of multiple suicide within one family, the central government must provide short-term compensation packages to families of

farmer. MASR's sister organization, BNES provides monthly stipends to families of farmers who have committed suicide to ensure that they have means to keep their children in school.

Regulating informal money lenders

Though number of institutions for providing financial assistance to farmers have been set but money lender has always been an integral part of agriculture in Punjab. Both centre and state governments can impose regulations on money lenders like limiting interest rate, shielding farmer's primary assets and protection against land alienation. Debt conciliation boards may also be set up as dispute resolution mechanism in situations where loans are given at exorbitant interest rates.

The central government must recognize suicides in Punjab and not limit their response to questioning the accuracy of the statistics:

At the Punjab Government's own request a study sponsored by the Punjab Agriculture University has verified beyond any doubt that the problem of farmer suicides in Punjab is by no means insignificant.

Suicide prevention education to be imparted

Villagers need to be taught about options and long term impact of suicide on their families. They need to be aware of possible alternatives instead of ending their lives in time of crises. Such social issues could be handled with psychological campaigns only. Moreover the government must pay attention to regular attendance of student and teacher at schools, allowing fee concessions to children of low income group families and vocational education so that new generations could think beyond farming too.

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