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### **ABSTRACT**

All human toil is for the mouth, yet the appetite is not satisfied. This is true in agriculture too. Our politician shout, preach from platforms that farmers are the back bone of the country's economy, but in reality the backbone lies fractured and our politicians are just not bothered our farmers problem. Agriculture in India is often attributed as gambling with Monsoon because of its almost exclusive dependency on Monsoons. The failure of these monsoons leading to series of droughts, lack of better prices, exploitation by Middlemen have been leading to series of suicides committed by farmers across India. In the 1990s India woke up to a spate of farmers suicides. The first state where suicides were reported was Maharashtra. Soon newspapers began to report similar occurrences from Andhra Pradesh, Vidarbha. This paper discusses the trend of formers suicide in India thereby create the awareness to change the policy and production trend in agriculture in India.

#### **Keywords:**

Suicides, Exploitation, Epidemic, Price Crash in One Year, Failure of Rainfall, Agrarian Crisis

#### **Introduction**

India is an Agrarian country with around 50 percent of its people directly or indirectly depends upon Agriculture. Agriculture in India is often attributed as gambling with Monsoon because of its almost exclusive dependency on Monsoons. The failure of these monsoons leading to series of droughts, lack of better prices, exploitation by Middlemen have been leading to series of suicides committed by farmers across India. This is true in agriculture too in India. Our politician shout, preach from platforms that farmers are the back bone of the country's economy , but in reality the backbone lies fractured and our politicians are just not bothered our farmers problem.

#### **History**

In the 1990s India woke up to a spate of farmers suicides. One of the major reporters of these suicides was the Rural Affairs Editor of The Hindu, P. Sainath. The first state where suicides were reported was Maharashtra. Soon newspapers began to report similar occurrences from Andhra Pradesh. In the beginning it was believed that most of the suicides were happening among the cotton growers, especially those from Vidarbha. A look at the figures given out by the State Crime Records Bureau, however, was sufficient to indicate that it was not just the cotton farmer but farmers as a professional category were suffering, irrespective of their holding size.

Moreover, it was not just the farmers from Vidarbha but all over Maharashtra who showed a significantly high suicide rate. The government appointed a number of inquiries to look into the causes of farmer's suicide and farm related distress in general. Subsequently Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Vidarbha and promised a package of Rs.110 billion (about \$2.4 billion) to be spent by the government in Vidarbha. The families of farmers who had committed suicide were also offered an ex gratia grant to the tune of Rs. 100,000 by the government. This figure kept on varying, depending on how much criticism the government was facing from the media and the opposition parties for being uncaring towards the farmers' plight. Such a high figure was ironic considering that the net average income of a family of farmers in India was approximately Rs.5000 per acre per annum. The economic plight of the farmer might be illustrated with the fact that a farmer having as much as 15 acres (61,000 m<sup>2</sup>) of land, and hence considered a well-off farmer, had an income of just a little more than what he would have earned were he to merely get the legal minimum wage for all of the 365 days of the year. Little wonder that despite government efforts at pumping in more money into the suicide belt. The suicide epidemic among farmers remained unabated through 2019-20. The problems of the farmers were quite comprehensive. There was little credit available. What was available was very costly. There was no advice on how best to conduct agriculture operations. Income through farming was not enough to meet even the minimum needs of a farming family. Support systems like free health facilities from the government were virtually non-existent. Traditionally support systems in the villages of India had been provided by the government. However, due to a variety of reasons the government had either withdrawn itself from its supportive role or plain simple miss governance had allowed facilities in the villages to wither away.

## **MAGNITUDE AND TRENDS IN FARMERS' SUICIDES IN INDIA, 2007-2020**

### **Numbers and Trends in Farm Suicides in India**

In the thirteen year period between 2007 and 2020 as many as 1, 76,304 farmers were committed suicide in India. If we consider the 12 year period from 2005 to 2016 the figure is close to 200,000: the exact figure (190,753) would be an underestimation since a couple of major states like Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan and a number of smaller states like Pondicherry did not report any farmers' suicides for one or the other - or both - of these two years. Thus, going by the official data, on average nearly 16,000 farmers committed suicide every year over the last decade or so. It is also clear from the table that every seventh suicide in the country was a farm suicide.

We would believe that even this number, shocking as it is, is in fact an underestimation of the actual number of farm suicides in the country during this period. These data published by the National Crime Records Bureau, as we have noted above, are put together from the police records from different states. Our experience during our field visits in Andhra Pradesh as a member of the Farmers' Commission set by the state government in 2014 was that the police often adopted a rather strict and stringent definition of a farmer in identifying a farm suicide. The title to land was taken as the criterion for identifying the farmer and this often left out a genuine farmer from the count. For example, a tenant farmer who leased in land and hence did not have a

**Table 1 Number of Farmers' Suicides and all-Suicides in India, 2007-2020 Year**

Number of Farmers' Suicides and all-Suicides in India, 1997-2010 Year	Farmers' Suicides		All Suicides	
	Number	As a percent of all suicides	Number	Suicide Rate (per 1,00000 population)
1997	13622 (100)	14.2	95829 (100)	10.0
1998	16015 (118)	15.3	104713 (109)	10.8
1999	16082 (118)	14.5	110587 (115)	11.2
2000	16603 (122)	15.3	108593 (113)	10.6
2001	16415 (121)	15.1	108506 (113)	10.6
2002	17971 (132)	16.3	110417 (115)	10.5
2003	17164 (126)	15.5	110851 (116)	10.4
2004	18241 (134)	16.0	113697 (119)	10.5
2005	17131 (126)	15.0	113914 (119)	10.3
2006	17060 (125)	14.4	118112 (123)	10.5
2007	17220 (126)	14.7	119112 (124)	10.4
2008	17220 (126)	14.7	122112 (126)	10.4
2009	17368 (126)	14.7	124112 (129)	10.4
2010	17320 (126)	14.7	125112 (131)	10.4
Total Number of suicides in the period 1997-2006	235484	15.2	1585667	-
Annual Compound Growth Rate (in percent)between 1997-2006	2.6	-	2.7	-

**Note: Figures in brackets give indices with 2007 as the base.**

**Source: Various issues of Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India (ADSI), National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.**

It is also clear from the table that the number of farm suicides has kept up a more or steady increase over this period in the country. The year 2008 in fact show a sharp increase in the number of farm suicides - an 18 percent jump from the previous year; and the number remained more or less steady at around 10,000 suicides per year over the next three years up to 2011. The year 2012 once again saw a sharp increase and close to a ten per cent increase compared to 2011 - and the number have more or less remained steady at around 10,000 per year in the period after that. The average number of farm suicides per year in the five year period 2012-2016, at 12,000

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 is substantially higher than the average (of 12,000 per year) for the previous five year period. Farm suicides have increased at annual compound growth rate of around 2.5 per cent per annum over the period 2007-2020; this rate is only marginally higher than the rate at which the general suicides have increased in this period. But as we shall see later, there are certain regions in the country where farm suicides are largely concentrated - and where the problem has seen a very sharp increase over this period with the farm suicides increasing at a much faster rate, in comparison, both with farm suicides in the country and general suicides in these regions.

### Distribution by Age of Farmers' Suicides in India

We may also note that apart from age distribution there are also other proximate factors which have a bearing on the comparison of farm suicide rates with the general suicide rates. And one such important factor is the rural-urban distribution of the two groups: While farmers would be overwhelmingly - almost by definition -rural residents, close 30 percent of the general population would reside in urban areas. This would mean that ideally, farm suicide rates should be compared with suicide rates in rural areas. Unfortunately the NCRB data do not give rural-urban distribution of suicides, and hence no such comparisons are possible. Now it is generally observed that rural suicide rates are lower than the urban suicide rates and hence the error introduced in comparing farm suicide rates with general suicide rates for the country as a whole would be exactly of the opposite nature than the error introduced by the 11 absence of age standardization in their comparison. This, coupled with the fact that farm suicide rates estimated for the year 2020 are likely to be underestimates either for that year itself or for a later year, say, 2020 - for reasons that we had elaborated above , should confirm, in our view, the rather distressing claim that farm suicide rates are significantly higher today than the general suicide rates.

**Table 2 Distribution by Age of Farmers' Suicides in India**

Distribution by Age of Farmers' Suicides in India, Category	Male						Female					
	Number of suicides in different age groups						Number of suicides in different age groups					
	upto 14 years	15-29 years	30-44 years	45-59 years	60+ years	Total	upto 14 years	15-29 years	30-44 years	45-59 years	60+ years	Total
Farmers	88 (0.6)	3830 (27.7)	(5119 (37.0)	3414 (24.7)	1378 (10.0)	13829 (100.0)	80 (3.1)	1028 (39.8)	889 (34.4)	451 (17.4)	138 (5.4)	2586 (100.0)
others	1410 (2.7)	16151 (30.8)	18384 (35)	11994 (22.9)	4546 (8.7)	52485 (100)	1429 (3.6)	17901 (45.2)	12056 (30.4)	5720 (14.4)	2500 (6.3)	39606 (100)
All	1498 (2.3)	19981 (30.1)	28503 (35.4)	15408 (23.2)	5924 (8.9)	66314 (100.0)	1509 (3.6)	18929 (44.9)	12945 (30.7)	6171 (14.6)	2638 (6.3)	42192 (100)
Farmers suicides as a percent of all suicides	5.9	19.2	21.8	22.2	23.3	20.9	5.3	5.4	6.9	7.3	5.2	6.1

**Note:** Figures in brackets give row percentages.

**Sources:** ADSI, NCRB, GOI, 2021

In sum, four significant facts emerge from our discussions so far on farm suicides in the country as a whole:

- 1) A large number of farmers - close to 10,000 per year - commit suicide today in the country; a number we believe is unacceptable large.
- 2) The rate of suicide among farmers is also likely to be very high in comparison with the rate for the general population;
- 3) An overwhelming proportion (nearly 85 percent) of farm suicides are by male farmers; and the number of farm suicides by young farmers, accounting for nearly 30 percent of the total, is not small; and
- 4) The trends in both the number of suicides and the rate of suicides are distressing: while the number seems to jump to a higher level in certain years - as in 2008 and 2012 - in the subsequent years after these sharp jumps, there is no reverting back to older numbers; they in fact seem to stabilize at this higher level till the next jump occurs. As for the farm suicide rates, there is reason to believe that they are increasing over time, at least from the year 2020 onwards; the contrast in this regard with general suicide rates which have remained more or less stable is noteworthy.

## **FACTORS UNDERLYING FARMERS' SUICIDES**

As with any suicide, mono-causal explanations for farmers' suicides would be totally inadequate. And they cannot be explained purely in terms of behavioural patterns and personal, psychological motivations; they have to be seen as social phenomena and one has to unearth the underlying social causes. It is worth emphasizing this simple point because there have been attempts at late, especially by state functionaries - particularly in the most affected states like Maharashtra to delink farm suicides from the agrarian crisis. The claim often made is that a number of farm suicides are not attributable to agrarian crisis and are due to factors like unsustainable life styles of farmers, alcoholism, large expenses on marriages, or due to some incurable diseases etc. And these types of explanations, we believe, are seriously flawed, since they do not view suicides as a social phenomenon.

Secondly, so long as those conditions which result in high levels of vulnerability exist and are not addressed - as in the farm suicide zone in the heartland of the country-any dip in the number of farm suicides in a year or two cannot be seen as a decisive break from its increasing trend. Any major external impulse - like say, a price crash in one year, a failure of rainfall in another etc. may again precipitate a crisis.

Thirdly, just as mono-causal explanations of farm suicides are totally inadequate, so would sporadic, disjointed, single-point policy interventions to deal with the problem be. We do

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not want to dismiss the role of 'package measures' - like a combination of debt relief, remunerative prices, employment guarantee measures etc - which, by providing a degree of relief and hope to farmers can bring down the number of suicides at least in the short term - something which seems to have happened in Kerala in the last year or so. But these measures by themselves are not a substitute for a comprehensive policy intervention to deal with both the pre-existing vulnerability on the one hand and the acute agrarian crisis on the other.

Such basic changes in state policies rarely come without pressures created by mass movements of the deprived sections of the population. India has had an enviable tradition of farmer's movements, with large scale farmers' mobilizations taking place even as late as the 1980s. But today such movements seem to have dried up: large numbers of farmers seem to be taking their lives rather than taking to the streets. And suicide is a cry of desperation rather than a form of social protest. It is this aspect of the situation which is as disturbing as the epidemic of farm suicides that we witness today. The reasons for this are not known; and understanding it as important as understanding the reasons for the epidemic of farm suicides in the country.

### **Responses to Farmers suicides**

Vidarbha was in the media for a spate of farmer suicides in recent years ostensibly because of the falling Minimum Support Price for cotton. The problem is complex and root causes include lopsided policies of the World Trade Organisation and developed nations' subsidies to their cotton farmers which make Vidarbha's cotton uncompetitive in world markets. Consequently Vidarbha is plagued by high rates of school drop outs, penniless widows left in the wake of suicides, loan sharks and exploitation of the vulnerable groups.

The Indian government had promised to increase the minimum rate for cotton by approximately Rs 100 (\$2) but reneged on its promise by reducing the Minimum Support Price further. This resulted in more suicides as farmers were ashamed to default on debt payments to loan sharks. "In 2016, 1,044 suicides were reported in Vidarbha alone- that's one suicide every eight hours." In April 2017 a development consulting group named Green Earth Social Development Consulting produced a report after doing an audit of the state and central government relief packages in Vidarbha. The report's conclusions were:

- Farmers' demands were not taken into account while preparing the relief package. Neither were civil society organisations, local government bodies, panchayats etc. consulted.
- The relief packages were mostly amalgamations of existing schemes. Apart from the farmer helpline and the direct financial assistance, there was scarcely anything new being offered. Pumping extra funds into additional schemes shows that no new idea was applied to solve a situation where existing measures had obviously failed.
- The farmer helpline did not give any substantial help to farmers except in Karnataka.

- The basis for selection of beneficiaries under the assistance scheme was not well-defined. Also, type of assistance to be given led to problems like a farmer needing a pair of bullocks getting a pump set and vice versa (or a farmer who has no access to water sources being given pump sets)
- Awareness regarding the package was also fairly low.

The report concluded quite alarmingly that the loan burden of the farmers would double in 2020. To attract attention a variety of catch phrases were coined such as 'SEZ' or (Farmers) 'Special Elimination Zone' states.

### **Multiple cropping systems**

Multiple cropping systems are ideal for farmers as it is an effective method of avoiding risk of loss for the farmers. In case one crop falls, the farmers need not worry but can easily tide over financial crunch through income from other crops. MCS is favoured one for drop water irrigating system it required less water but Indian farmers are newly one for this kind of system. Agricultural sector is required huge investment hence the government will launch another special plan for to improve new technology to increase the productivity of agriculture sector in India

### **Conclusion**

K. Nagaraj, author of the biggest study on Indian farm suicides, says, "That these numbers are rising even as the farmer population shrinks, confirms the agrarian crisis is still burning. The Indian crops are mainly grown organically as chemical farming proved to failure of it. Hence the repayable capacity of farmers is questioned. Even today our agriculture production is around 200 to 250 million tones, which are not enough to our size of population and which cause for food inflation, that has been in double digits in last two years. This trend will continue in India. It will face mall nutrition problem among children and women and large number of starvation death in future. Hence this is the right time the government implement new plan on agricultural sector which will sustainable developed the agricultural sector thereby we can improve the repaying capacity of the farmers and avoided the farmers' suicide. Unless India no longer lives in villages; it lives in cities and cramped town. And the government's campaign on 'rural India shining' is just eyewash.

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