

Farmers Suicide and Response of the Government in India -An Analysis

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Abstract: *India is an agrarian country with around 60% of its people depending directly or indirectly upon agriculture. Farmer suicides account for 11.2% of all suicides in India. Farmer suicide in India is the intentional ending of one's life by a person dependent on farming as their primary source of livelihood. There are number of reasons for farmer suicides, such as monsoon failure, high debt burdens, genetically modified crops, government policies, public mental health, personal issues and family problems. There is also accusation of states fudging the data on farmer suicides. In 2012, the National Crime Records Bureau of India reported 13,754 farmer suicides. The highest number of farmer suicides was recorded in 2004 when 18,241 farmers committed suicide. The farmer's suicide rate in India has ranged between 1.4 to 1.8 per 100,000 in the total population, over a 10-year period through 2005. From 1995 to 2013, a total of 296,438 farmers have killed themselves in India, or an average of 16,469 suicides per year. During the same period, about 9.5 million people died per year in India from other causes including malnutrition, diseases and suicides that were non-farming related, or about 171 million deaths from 1995 to 2013. The present paper made an attempt to analyse the reasons for farmers suicide in India and the State government field surveys (Statistics) on variation of Farmers suicides in Different states. It also focused on Government Response to Farmers Suicide and Effectiveness of government policies.*

Keywords: *farmer suicides, National Crime Records Bureau of India, genetically modified crops*

I. Introduction

India is an agrarian country with around 60% of its people depending directly or indirectly upon agriculture. Farmer suicides account for 11.2% of all suicides in India. Farmer suicide in India is the intentional ending of one's life by a person dependent on farming as their primary source of livelihood. Activists and scholars have offered a number of conflicting reasons for farmer suicides, such as monsoon failure, high debt burdens, genetically modified crops, government policies, public mental health, personal issues and family problems. There is also accusation of states fudging the data on farmer suicides. In 2012, the National Crime Records Bureau of India reported 13,754 farmer suicides. The highest number of farmer suicides was recorded in 2004 when 18,241 farmers committed suicide. The farmer's suicide rate in India has ranged between 1.4 to 1.8 per 100,000 in total population, over a 10-year period through 2005. From 1995 to 2013, a total of 296,438 farmers have killed themselves in India, or an average of 16,469 suicides per year. During the same period, about 9.5 million people died per year in India from other causes including malnutrition, diseases and suicides that were non-farming related, or about 171 million deaths from 1995 to 2013. Historical records relating to frustration, revolts and high mortality rates among farmers in India, particularly cash crop farmers, date back to the 19th century. The high land taxes of 1870s, payable in cash regardless of the effects of frequent famines on farm output or productivity, combined with colonial protection of usury, money lenders and landowner rights, contributed to widespread penury and frustration among cotton and other farmers, ultimately leading to Deccan Riots of 1875-1877. The British government enacted the Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act in 1879, to limit the interest rate charged by money lenders to Deccan cotton farmers, but applied it selectively to areas that served British cotton trading interests. Rural mortality rates, in predominantly agrarian British India, were very high between 1850 to 1940s. However starvation related deaths far exceeded those by suicide, the latter being officially classified under "injuries". Death rate classified under "injuries", in 1897, was 79 per 100,000 people in Central Provinces of India and 37 per 100,000 people in Bombay Presidency.

Ganapathi and Venkoba Rao analyzed suicides in parts of Tamil Nadu in 1966. They recommended that the distribution of agricultural organo-phosphorus compounds be restricted. Similarly, Nandi et al. in 1979 noted the role of freely available agricultural insecticides in suicides in rural West Bengal and suggested that their availability be regulated. Hegde studied rural suicides in villages of northern Karnataka over 1962 to 1970, and stated the suicide incidence rate to be 5.7 per 100,000 populations. Reddy, in 1993, reviewed high rates of farmer suicides in Andhra Pradesh and its relationship to farm size and productivity.

Reporting in popular press about farmers' suicides in India began in mid 1990s, particularly by Palagummi Sainath. In 2000s, the issue gained international attention and a variety of Indian government initiatives National Crime Records Bureau, an office of the Ministry of Home Affairs Government of India, has

been collecting and publishing suicide statistics for India since the 1950s, as annual Accidental Deaths & Suicides in India reports. It started separately collecting and publishing farmer's suicide statistics from 1995. The actual demographic breakdown published in the 2010 NCRB report (Page on Ncrb), out of 134,599 suicides reported in India for that year, 15,964 less than 12% belonged to the farming community, though farmers constitute almost two-thirds of the billion-strong Indian population. In comparison, housewives at 25,058 and non-farming self-employed (business+ professional + other) at 39,365 are far more suicidal. Moreover, the leading causes of suicide in the population as a whole are family problems and ill-health, around 20% each, with economic failures, bankruptcies etc. coming in at 6%. For a global data point, Suicide in the United States is around 37,000 per annum for a population of 314 million.

Various reasons have been offered to explain why farmers commit suicide in India, including, drought, and debt, use of genetically modified seed, public health and government economic policies. There is no consensus on what the main causes might be but studies show suicide victims are motivated by more than one cause, on average three or more causes for committing suicide. Panagariya states that, "farm-related reasons get cited only approximately 25 percent of the time as reasons for suicide", and, "studies do consistently show greater debt burden and greater reliance on informal sources of credit" amongst farmers who commit suicide.

Reasons for farmer's suicide in India are as follows;

Reasons for farm suicides	Percent (of suicides)
Habits like drinking, gambling, etc.	20.35
Failure of crops	16.81
Other reasons (e.g. chit fund)	15.04
Family problems with spouse, others	13.27
Chronic illness	9.73
Marriage of daughters	5.31
Political affiliation	4.42
Property disputes	2.65
Debt burden	2.65
Price crash	2.65
Borrowing too much (e.g. for house construction)	2.65
Losses in non-farm activities	1.77
Failure of bore well	0.88

A study conducted in 2014 found that there are three specific characteristics associated with high risk farmers: "those that grow cash crops such as coffee and cotton; those with 'marginal' farms of less than one hectare; and those with debts of 300 Rupees or more." The study also found that the Indian states in which these three characteristics are most common had the highest suicide rates and also accounted for "almost 75% of the variability in state-level suicides." A 2012 study did a regional survey on farmers' suicide in rural Vidarbha (Maharashtra) and applied a Smith's Saliency method to qualitatively rank the expressed causes among farming families who had lost someone to suicide. The expressed reasons in order of importance behind farmer suicides were – debt, alcohol addiction, environment, low produce prices, stress and family responsibilities, apathy, poor irrigation, increased cost of cultivation, private money lenders, use of chemical fertilizers and crop failure. In other words debt to stress and family responsibilities were rated as significantly higher than fertilizers and crop failure. In a different study in the same region in 2006, indebtedness (87%) and deterioration in the economic status (74%) were found to be major risk factors for suicide.

Studies dated 2004 through 2006 identified several causes for farmers suicide, such as insufficient or risky credit systems, the difficulty of farming semi-arid regions, poor agricultural income, absence of alternative income opportunities, a downturn in the urban economy which forced non-farmers into farming, and the absence of suitable counseling services.¹ In 2004, in response to a request from the All India Biodynamic and Organic Farming Association, the Mumbai High Court required the Tata Institute to produce a report on farmer suicides in Maharashtra, and the institute submitted its report in March 2005. The survey cited "government apathy, the absence of a safety net for farmers, and lack of access to information related to agriculture as the chief causes for the desperate condition of farmers in the state. An Indian study conducted in 2002 indicated an association between victims engaging in entrepreneurial activities (such as venturing into new crops, cash crops, and following market trends) and their failure in meeting expected goals due to a range of constraints.

Other Causes

Drought

As much as 80% of India's farmland relies on flooding during monsoon season, so inadequate rainfall can cause droughts, making crop failure more common. In regions that have experienced droughts, crop yields

have declined, and food for cattle has become scarcer. Agricultural regions that have been affected by droughts have subsequently seen their suicide rates increase.

New Economic Policy

Left leaning economists like Utsa Patnaik, Jayati Ghosh and Prabhat Patnaik suggest that a structural change in the macro-economic policy of Indian Government that favoured privatisation, liberalisation and globalisation is the root cause of farmer suicides.

GM crops

A number of social activist groups and studies proposed a link between GM crops and farmer suicides. Bt cotton (*Bacillus thuringiensis* cotton) was claimed to be responsible for farmer suicides. Bt cotton seeds cost nearly twice as much as ordinary ones. The higher costs forced many farmers into taking ever larger loans, often from private moneylenders charging exorbitant interest rates (60% a year). The moneylender was claimed to collect his dues at harvest time, by compelling farmers to sell their cotton to him at a price lower than it fetches on the market. According to activists, this created a source of debt and economic stress, ultimately suicides, among farmers. Scholars claim that this Bt cotton theory made certain assumptions and ignored field reality. Indian Farmers are Committing Suicide because of Monsanto's costly GMO Crops. Monsanto's were supposed to feed the world hunger and starvation but instead the diverse sustainable organic agriculture was replaced with globalization, GMO crops and monopoly. According to a report by Daily Mail, every 30 minutes an Indian farmer commits suicide as a result of Monsanto's GMO crops. In the last decade, more than 250,000 Indian farmers have killed themselves because of Monsanto's costly seeds and pesticides. Globalization and monopoly have forced farmers to buy GMO seeds and since GMO crops have become pest resistant, the farmers have no choice but to purchase Monsanto's popular herbicide. In 2008, the Daily Mail called the continuous suicide of Indian farmers a "genocide" in the human history. What's really disturbing is that often time farmers commit suicide by drinking the insecticide shipped to them by Monsanto. After the use of Monsanto's BT cotton in 2002, the rate of suicide among Indian farmers increased drastically. The story started when 90% of Indian cotton farmers were forced to switch to Monsanto's Bt crop hoping that Bt crops were pest resistant (so farmers did not have to buy Monsanto's costly herbicide). However after a while, Bt cotton's pests resistant quality started to fade away so farmers had to again buy and use Monsanto's costly herbicide.

The high cost of GMO seeds, extensive use of herbicides and great reduction in crop value have often times left farmers bankrupt and as a result many farmers are falling into the endless cycle of debt, depression, hopelessness and despair and they have no choice but to end their lives. The figures provided by NY University School of Law show that just in 2009 alone, 17,638 of farmers committed suicide. Law. As a result of Monsanto's costly GMO seeds, many families of farmers have lost their livelihood and lands and are left on their own to struggle with starvation and misery. 1.1 billion (Which is 60% of Indian population) are directly or indirectly dependent on the agriculture. Monsanto is responsible for dominating the market by forcing farmers to buy their seeds and chemicals. Seeds that die every year, so farmers are forced to buy new seeds.

In 2011, a review of the evidence regarding the relationship between Bt cotton and farmers' suicides in India was published in the *Journal of Development Studies*, also by researchers from IFPRI, which found that "Available data show no evidence of a 'resurgence' of farmer suicides. Moreover, Bt cotton technology has been very effective overall in India." Martin Qaim finds that Bt cotton is controversial in India, irrespective of the scholarly evidence. Anti-biotech activist groups in India repeat their claim that there is evidence of link between Bt cotton and farmers suicides, a claim that is perpetuated by mass media. This linking of farmer's suicide and biotech industry has led to negative opinions in public policy making process. Stone suggests that the arrival and expansion of GM cotton led to a campaign of misinformation, by all sides, exacerbating the farmer's situation; activists have fuelled the persistence of a legend of failure and rejection of Bt cotton with sensational claims of livestock death and farmer suicide, while the other side has been incorrectly pronouncing Bt cotton a major success based on literature that is actually inconclusive. The cotton cash crop farmer's situation is complex and continues to evolve, suggests Stone. Gilbert, in a 2013 article published in *Nature*, (Journal) states, "contrary to popular myth, the introduction in 2002 of genetically modified Bt cotton is not associated with a rise in suicide rates among Indian farmers." In another 2014 review, Ian Plewis states, "the available data does not support the view that farmer suicides have increased following the introduction of Bt cotton. Taking all states together, there is evidence to support the hypothesis that the reverse is true: male farmer suicide rates have actually declined after 2005 having been increasing before then".

State government field surveys (Statistics) on Farmers suicides in Different states

Patel et al. find that southern Indian states have ten times higher rates of suicides than some northern states. This difference, they claim, is not because of misclassification of a person's death, for example as homicide, but because of regional causes. The most common cause for suicide in India's south are a combination

of social issues, such as interpersonal and family problems, financial difficulties, and pre-existing mental illness. Suicidal ideation is as culturally accepted in south India as in some high-income countries. The high suicide rates in southern states of India may be highest Patel et al. in part because of social acceptance of suicide as a method to deal with difficulties. The Government of Maharashtra, concerned about the highest total number of farmer suicides among its rural populations, commissioned its own study into reasons. At its behest, Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research in Mumbai did field research and found the top causes of farmer's suicides to be: debt, low income and crop failure, family issues such as illness and inability to pay celebration expenses for daughter's marriage, lack of secondary income occupations and lack of value-added opportunities. The National Crime Records Bureau of India reported in its 2012 annual report that 135,445 people committed suicide in India, of which 13,754 were farmers (11.2%). Of these, 5 out of 29 states accounted for 10,486 farmer suicides (76%) – Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Kerala. In 2011, a total of 135,585 people committed suicide, of which 14,207 were farmers. In 2010, 15,963 farmers in India committed suicide, while total suicides were 134,599. In 2012, the state of Maharashtra, with 3,786 farmers' suicides, accounted for about a quarter of the all India's farmer suicides total (13,754). Farmer suicides rates in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh – two large states of India by size and population – have been about 10 times lower than Maharashtra, Kerala and Pondicherry. In 2012, there were 745 farmer suicides in Uttar Pradesh, a state with an estimated population of 205.43 million. In 2014 there were eight farmer suicides in Uttar Pradesh. According to IFFRI study number of suicides during 2005–2009 in Gujarat 387, Kerala 905, Punjab 75 and Tamil Nadu 26. While 1802 farmers committed suicide in Chhattisgarh in 2009 and 1126 in 2010, its farmer's suicide dropped to zero in 2011, leading to accusations of data manipulation. According to the 2012 statistics from the National Crime Records Bureau, the farmer suicides statistics are as follows (*Note: The NCRB lists suicides in the different employment categories, but it is not necessary that farming or crop-failure is the cause of the suicides listed in the "farmer" category.*)

Government Response to Farmers Suicide

The government appointed a number of inquiries to look into the causes of farmers suicide and farm related distress in general. Krishak Ayog (National Farmer Commission) visited all suicide prone farming regions of India, then in 2006 published three reports with its recommendations. Subsequently Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Vidarbha in 2006 and promised a package of 110 billion (about \$2.4 billion). The families of farmers who had committed suicide were also offered an *ex gratia* grant of 100,000 (about \$2,000) by the government, though this amount was changed several times.

2006 relief package

In 2006, the Government of India identified 31 districts in the four states of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Kerala with high relative incidence of farmer's suicides. A special rehabilitation package was launched to mitigate the distress of these farmers. The package provided debt relief to farmers, improved supply of institutional credit, improved irrigation facilities, employed experts and social service personnel to provide farming support services, and introduced subsidiary income opportunities through horticulture, livestock, dairying and fisheries. The Government of India also announced an *ex-gratia* cash assistance from Prime Ministers National Relief Fund to the farmers. Additionally, among other things, the

Government of India announced:

- In the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, that had received considerable mass media news coverage on farmer suicides, all farmer families of Vidarbha in six affected districts of Maharashtra were given a cash sum of 05 million (US\$79,000) each, to help pay off the debt principal.
- 7.12 billion (US\$110 million) in interest owed, as of 30 June 2006, was waived. The burden of payment was shared equally between the Central and the State government.
- The Government created a special credit vehicle for Vidarbha farmer, to the tune of 12.75 billion (US\$200 million). Special teams comprising NABARD and banks were deputed to ensure fresh credit starts flowing to all farmers of the region.
- An allocation of 21.77 billion (US\$350 million) was made to improve the irrigation infrastructure so that the farmers of Vidarbha region had assured irrigation facilities in the future.

Agricultural debt waiver and debt relief scheme, 2008

The Government of India implemented the Agricultural debt Waiver and Debt Relief Scheme, 2008 to benefit over 36 million farmers at a cost of 653 billion (US\$10 billion). This spending was aimed at writing off part of loan principal as well as the interest owed by the farmers. Direct agricultural loan by stressed farmers under so-called Kisan Credit Card were also covered under this Scheme

Regional initiatives

Various state governments in India have launched their own initiatives to help prevent farmer suicides. The government of Maharashtra set up a dedicated group to deal with farm distress in 2006 known as the Vasantrao Naik ShetiSwavlamban Mission, based in Amravati. A group to study the Farmers Suicides was also constituted by the Government of Karnataka under the Chairmanship of DrVeeresh, Former Vice-Chancellor of Agricultural University and Prof Deshpande as member.

Maharashtra Bill to regulate farmer loan terms, 2008

The State government of Maharashtra, one of the most farmer suicide affected states, passed the Money Lending (Regulation) Act, 2008 to regulate all private money lending to farmers. The bill set maximum legally allowed interest rates on any loans to farmers, setting it to be slightly above the money lending rate by Reserve Bank of India, and it also covered pending loans.

Maharashtra relief package, 2010

The State Government of Maharashtra made it illegal, in 2010, for non-licensed moneylenders from seeking loan repayment. The State Government also announced¹ that it will from Village Farmer Self Help Groups, that will disburse government financed loans, a low rate Crop Insurance program whose premium will be paid 50% by farmer and 50% by government, launch of alternate income opportunities such as poultry, dairy and sericulture for farmers in high suicide prone districts. The government further announced that it will finance a marriage fund under its *SamudaikLagna* with 10 million (US\$160,000) per year per district, for community marriage celebrations, where many couples get married at the same time to help minimize the cost of marriage celebrations – a cause of suicides among farmers as identified by its own study.

Kerala Farmers' Debt Relief Commission (Amendment) Bill, 2012

Kerala, in 2012, amended the Kerala Farmers' Debt Relief Commission Act, 2006 to extend benefits to all distressed farmers with loans through 2011. It cited continuing farmer suicides as a motivation.

2013 diversify income sources package

In 2013, the Government of India launched a *Special Livestock Sector and Fisheries Package* for farmers suicide-prone regions of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala. The package was aimed to diversify income sources of farmers. The total welfare package consisted of 912 million (US\$14 million).

Effectiveness of government response

The government's response and relief packages have generally been ineffective, misdirected and flawed - states SurinderSud. It has focused on credit and loan, rather than income, productivity and farmer prosperity. Assistance in paying off outstanding principal and interest helps the money lenders, but has failed to create reliable and good sources of income for the farmer going forward. The usurious moneylenders continue to offer loans at interest rates between 24 to 50 percent, while income generating potential of the land the farmer works on has remained low and subject to weather conditions. Sud states that, the government has failed to understand that debt relief just postpones the problem and a more lasting answer to farmer distress can only come from reliable income sources, higher crop yields per hectare, irrigation and other infrastructure security. Golait, in a Reserve Bank of India paper, acknowledged the positive role of crop diversification initiative announced in government's response to reports of farmer suicides. Golait added, "Indian agriculture still suffers from: i) poor productivity, ii) falling water levels, iii) expensive credit, iv) a distorted market, v) many middlemen and intermediaries who increase cost but do not add much value, vi) laws that stifle private investment, vii) controlled prices, viii) poor infrastructure, and ix) inappropriate research. Thus the approach with mere emphasis on credit in isolation from the above factors will not help agriculture". Furthermore, recommended Golait, a more pro-active role in creating and maintaining reliable irrigation and other agriculture infrastructure is necessary to address farmer distress in India.

International comparison

Farmers' suicide is a global phenomenon. Outside India, studies in Sri Lanka, USA, Canada, England and Australia have identified farming as a high stress profession that is associated with a higher suicide rate than the general population. This is particularly true among small scale farmers and after periods of economic distress. Fraser et al., similarly, after a review of 52 scholarly publications, conclude that farming populations in the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia, Canada and the United States have the highest rates of suicide of any industry and there is growing evidence that those involved in farming are at higher risk of developing mental health problems. Their review claims a wide range of reasons behind farmer's suicide globally including mental health issues, physical environment, family problems, economic stress and uncertainties. Significantly higher

suicide rate among farmers than general population have been reported in developed countries such as the UK and the US.

Summer 2007 by producer Atul Pandey, focused on the issue of farmer suicides in Maharashtra's Vidarbha region, as did the 2009 Bollywood film *Kissan*. Prior to this *The Dying Fields*, a documentary directed by Fred de Sam Lazaro was aired in August 2007 on Wide Angle (TV series). The 2010 award-winning film *JhingChikJhing* is based around the emotive issue of farmer suicides in Maharashtra. It looks at how the farmer has very little in his control and looks at the impact of indebtedness on his family. In 2006, a documentary by Indian film maker Sumit Khanna titled *Mere Desh Ki Dharti*, did a comprehensive review of the way we grow our food. A well researched and in-depth understanding of the agrarian crisis, it won the national award for the best Investigative film. In 2009, the International Museum of Women included an examination of the impact of farmers' suicides on the lives of the farmers' wives and children in their exhibition *Economica: Women and the Global Economy*. Their slideshow "Growing Debt" and accompanying essay by curator Masum Momaya entitled "Money of Her Own" showed how many widows were left with the burden of their husbands' debts, and were forced to work as indentured servants to repay the debt. The widows were also unlikely to remarry, because other men in the community were unwilling to take on the widows' debts for themselves.

II. Conclusions

At present satellites, manned planes and walking the field are the main ways for crop monitor; these methods often can be incomplete or time consuming. Besides when data is collected it can take a long time to process and analyze. As a result, it can be difficult or impossible for the farmers to react to a problem like a disease outbreak before it's too late or the costs to treat it have soared. Drones are quickly moving from the battlefield to the farmer's field. They are on the verge of helping growers oversee millions of acres and saving them big money in the process, the paper noted. As unfortunate incidents of farmers' suicides have shaken the national conscience, an ASSOCHAM-Sky met paper has made out a case for technological leap-frog into solving the problems of small and marginal farmers with the governments providing all-out support by using advanced technologies and means including Drones and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs).

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