

Review Article

FARMERS' SUICIDE IN INDIA: "SOCIOLOGICAL DISASTER OR UNRECOGNIZED PSYCHOPATHOLOGY"

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Abstract

Though agricultural farming is considered a peaceful and healthy industry, it has a high rate of mortality, especially suicide. Farmer suicides account for 11.2% of all suicides in India. This is an increase of 5.7% when compared with 2020 figures. In 2022, many states reported drought conditions and untimely incessant rainfall, leading to a high suicide rate. Unrestrained imports and changes in tariff regimes brought in by the liberal economic reforms have led to a drastic drop in agricultural prices, identified as reasons by social scientists for farmer suicides. The rising cost of cotton cultivation and pesticide costs are pointed out as reasons for suicide among cotton farmers. Mental health and psychosocial aspects are largely ignored in the discussion of farmer suicides. Psychological autopsy studies on farmers' suicides have reported significant psychiatric morbidity among victims. We should look for the possibility of a treatable psychiatric illness behind every farmer's suicide to identify and treat these conditions, and this will make a significant "medical breakthrough" in the fight against suicide.

Key Words: Farmers, suicide, psychological autopsy

Introduction

India is an agrarian country, with around 60% of its population depending directly or indirectly on agriculture. Agriculture in India is gambling with monsoons because of its dependency on precipitation from monsoons. The failure of monsoons with subsequent droughts, lack of better prices, and exploitation of the farmers by middlemen, all of which have led to a series of suicides committed by farmers across India.¹

Statistics

Suicides in the farming industry continued to

increase in 2022. According to the latest report of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 11,290 suicide cases were reported from across the country last year. This is an increase of 3.7% from 2021, when 10,281 deaths were reported. It is an increase of 5.7% when compared with 2020 figures.²

In the latest NCRB data of 6,083 deaths by suicides of agricultural laborers during 2022, 5,472 were male and 611 were female. Of 5,207 farmer/cultivator suicides, 4,999 were male, and 208 were female.

The figures from 2022 indicate that at least one farmer died by suicide every hour in India. In

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fact, farmers' suicides have been showing an increasing trend since 2019, as per NCRB data. If we look more closely, it is seen that two-thirds of farmer suicides are confined to six states – Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. Farmers in rural India were committing suicide more than at any other time.³

The last few years have not been kind to agriculture in India. In 2022, many states reported drought conditions and untimely incessant rainfall. This had resulted in the destruction of standing crops. Problems were multiplied by skyrocketing fodder prices and lumpy skin disease; that didn't make it easier for cattle farmers.

Another emerging and worrying trend from the NCRB data was those deaths by suicide of agricultural laborers (those depending on daily wages from farming activities), which was higher than farmers/cultivators. Among the 11,290 persons engaged in farming, at least 53% (6,083) of those who died by suicide were agricultural laborers. According to NCRB, while the number of farmer suicides increased since 2001, the number of farmers has fallen, as thousands abandoned agriculture in distress.⁴ Figure 1. shows differences in the number of suicides by farmers/farm laborers.

This is significant because, over the years, the dependence of an average agricultural household for its income has been increasing on wages from farming rather than crop production. This was highlighted in the 77th round of the National Sample Survey, Land and Livestock Holdings of Households and Situation Assessment of Agricultural Households, released in 2021.⁵ The Survey found that the highest income for a farming household was Rs 4,063, which came from wages in return for serving as agricultural labor. This was followed by livestock and then cultivation, which saw a steep decline from 48% in 2013 to 38% in 2019. Overall, farmers' incomes have not increased much. The Survey, which is the most recent official data, showed that the monthly income in

2019 was only Rs. 10,218 per month. It was Rs 6,426 in 2012-13.

States with Highest Farmer Suicides

Maharashtra reported the highest number of farmer suicides (4,248), and this state has contributed to 38% of all deaths by suicide of those involved in agriculture. This dangerous situation forced the Maharashtra government to set up a dedicated office to deal with farmer's distress.⁶ The second-highest number of cases were reported from Karnataka (2,392), followed by Andhra Pradesh (917), Tamil Nadu (728), and Madhya Pradesh (641). Incidentally, Uttar Pradesh saw the highest increase in number of suicides among all states – a 42.13% rise when compared with 2021. The second-highest increase was in Chhattisgarh (31.65%). Andhra Pradesh, while recording the third-highest number of cases, actually reported a decrease of 16% from its 2021 figure. Similarly, Kerala showed a decline of 30%. Certain states and Union territories like West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, Uttarakhand, Goa, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Chandigarh, Delhi, Lakshadweep, and Puducherry reported zero suicides of farmers/cultivators as well as agricultural laborers. Figure 2. shows the state-wise distribution of suicides by farmers and farm laborers.

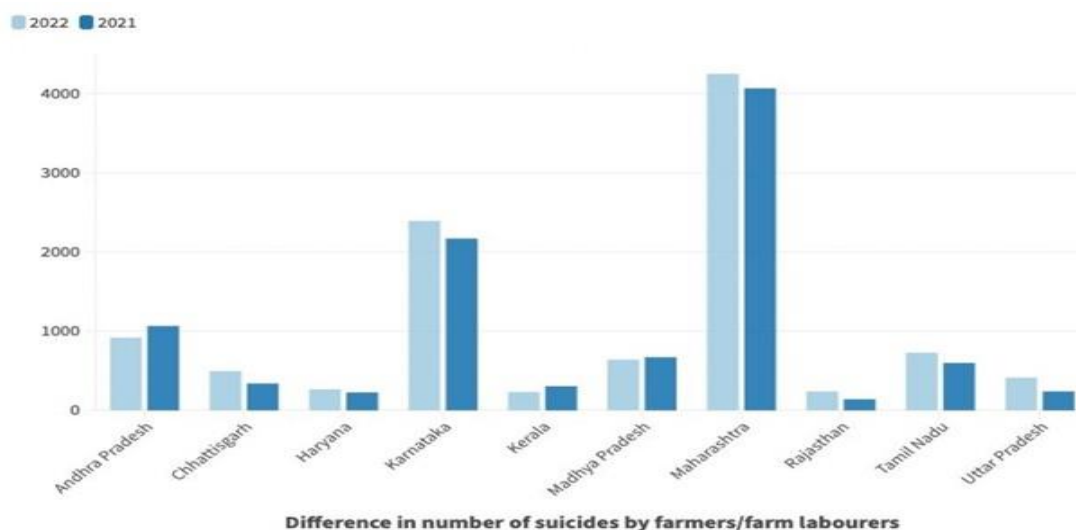
Why Farmer Suicides are Under-Estimated?

In our country, those who do not have land titles will not qualify to be counted as farmers. The farmers who come under this category are tenant farmers. Indirectly, it is reflected in the high number of farmer suicides versus the fast decline in the total farm population in the country. From 1991 to 2001, around eight million cultivators quit farming.⁷

Climate Link

More than 80% of India's farming depends on rains during the monsoon season. Inadequate rainfall can cause droughts, making crop failure more common.⁸ Agricultural regions that have been affected by droughts have subsequently

Figure 1. Differences in the number of suicides by farmers/farm laborers



Source: NCRB, 2022

reported increased suicide rates.⁹

A study by the International Institute for Environment and Development analyzed the association between rainfall deviation from normal levels and the number of farmers' suicides. Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh reported 62%, 44%, and 76% of land as drought-prone, respectively, and also reported high suicide rates among farmers. Data covering 2014-15 to 2020-21 showed a negative correlation, indicating that the suicide rate is consistently higher in years with a rainfall deficit.¹⁰ The reason why some states do not record high farmer suicides despite seeing high crop damage due to deficient rainfall or floods was also mentioned in this study. It reported that social protection programs like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Scheme (MGNREGS) could effectively limit climate vulnerability in economies primarily dependent on agriculture or seasonal work.

Economic Link

Various studies identify important factors as insufficient or risky credit systems, the difficulty of farming in semi-arid regions, poor agricultural income, the absence of alternative

income opportunities, a downturn in the urban economy that forced non-farmers into farming, and the lack of suitable counseling services.¹¹

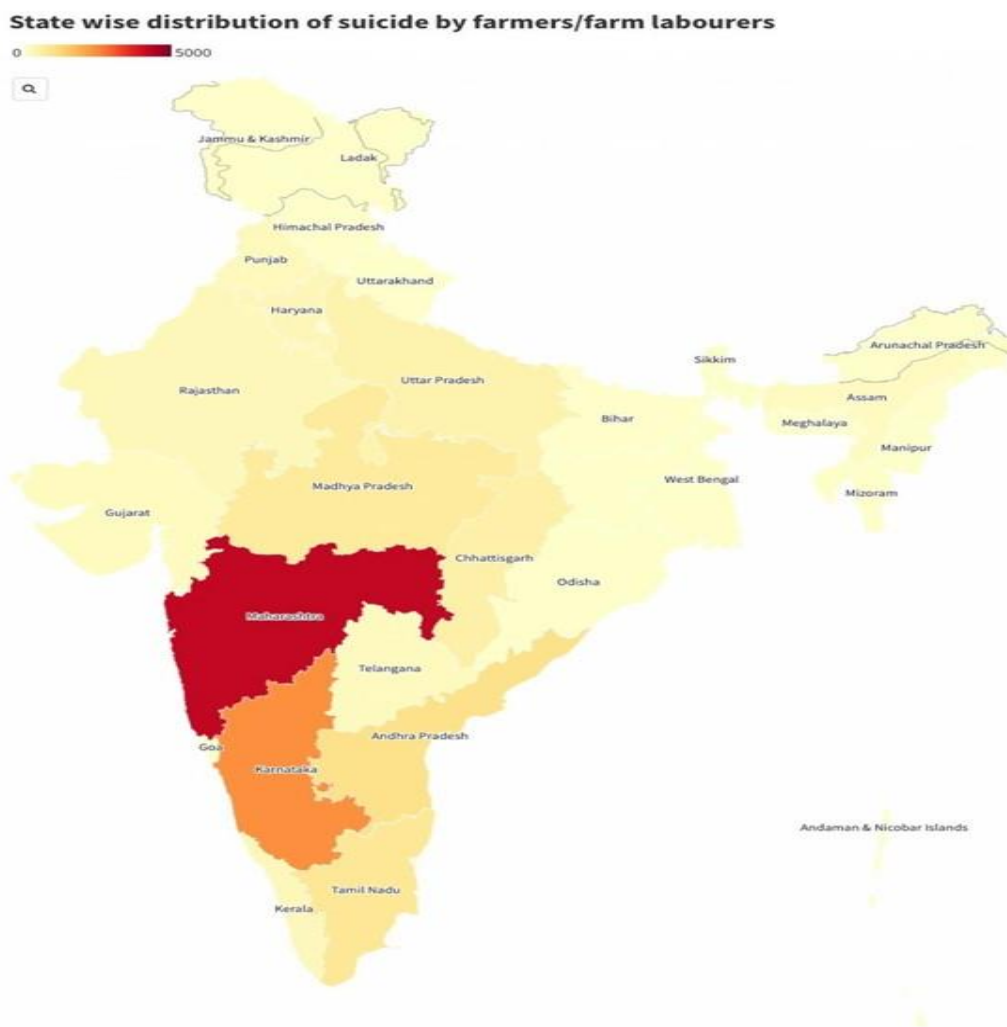
Unrestrained imports and changes in tariff regimes brought in by the liberal economic reforms have led to a drastic drop in agricultural prices over the last few years. Many social scientists have identified a variety of causes for farmer suicides.¹² India was transforming rapidly into a primarily urban, industrial society with industry as its primary source of income, and the government and society had become unconcerned about the condition of the countryside. Moreover, a downturn in the urban economy was pushing a large number of distressed non-farmers to try their luck at cultivation - the farmer was also caught in a Scissors Crisis. Such stresses pushed many into a corner where suicide became an option.

Government apathy, the absence of a safety net for farmers, and the lack of access to information related to agriculture are the chief causes of farmers' suicides.¹³

New Economic Policy

Economists like Utsa Patnaik, Jayati Ghosh, and

Figure 2. State-wise distribution of suicides by farmers and farm laborers



Prabhat Patnaik observe that structural changes in the macro-economic policy of the Indian Government that favored privatization, liberalization, and globalization are the root cause of farmer suicides.¹⁴

Genetically Modified (GM) crops

87% of Indian cotton-growing land was used for Bt cotton. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) and the Central Institute for Cotton Research (CICR) stated that the cost of cotton cultivation had jumped as a consequence of rising pesticide costs associated with Bt cotton production, while the yield declined.^{15,16}

Mental Health and Psychosocial Aspects

These aspects are ignored mainly in the

the discussion of farmer suicides. On the other side of the coin, some social activists believe that it is not a mental health issue. Vandana Shiva, in a BBC interview, mentioned that “When 40,000 Indian farmers end their life, it is no more an issue of psychological aberration, it is no more an issue of depression, it has become an economic phenomenon”.¹⁷ In a psychological autopsy study on farmers’ suicide from an agrarian district of Kerala, alcohol dependence/abuse was reported in 33% and depression in 28% of the victims. Psychoses and other psychiatric disorders were significantly low among victims.¹⁸ Moreover, most of these attempts were impulsive and happened within a few hours of some triggering factor. Walker and Walker (1988), in their study

on farmers' suicides, reported that even in the absence of significant psychiatric morbidity, suicide in them was an endpoint to a series of difficulties accumulated over time.¹⁹

Bhise and Behere (2016), in their study on risk factors for farmers' suicides in Central Rural India, reported psychiatric illness in 60% of their sample. The common probable diagnoses were depression (37.7%), alcohol dependence syndrome (10.2%), brief psychotic disorder (4.0%), schizophrenia (3.1), alcohol dependence syndrome with major depressive disorder (2.0%), erectile dysfunction (1.0%), alcohol-induced psychotic disorder (1.0%), and acute stress reaction (1.0%). Use of alcohol, irrespective of abuse or dependence, increased the risk of suicide by nearly two times (OR = 2.15; 95% Confidence Interval = 1.11-4.15).²⁰ Same authors, in another study in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, reported addiction as a significant contributory factor for suicide among farmers.²¹

Alcoholism has a complex relationship with suicide in terms of biochemical as well as situational factors. Chronic alcoholics, during the course of their lives, are likely to face a variety of stressors such as interpersonal problems, diminishing social support, etc., all of which are risk factors for suicide. The government should initiate policies and programs for reducing the availability of alcohol and provisions for early detection and treatment of alcoholics and their families.

In a country like India, without a well-developed economy, poor financial conditions, and a less effective social network, farmers may have more psychosocial stress. This could be a reason for an under-representation of severe psychiatric illnesses in Indian farmers' suicides.²² However, we should look for the possibility of a treatable psychiatric illness behind every suicide to identify and treat these conditions, and this will make a significant "medical breakthrough" in the fight against suicide.²³

There are some notable differences among farmers' suicides and suicides in the general population. A significantly higher proportion of farmers' suicide victims had indebtedness than reported among suicide victims in general.¹⁸ On the other hand, interpersonal problems, violence in the family, correlation with alcohol dependence, history of suicide attempts, and family history of suicide were lesser among farmers who had committed suicide than that found in general psychological autopsy studies from India.²⁰

Remedial Measures

Appropriate measures need to be taken to solve financial difficulties. Farmers need guidance for scientific cultivation. Early detection and management of psychological problems, especially depression and alcoholism, are the need of the hour. The government should start crisis intervention centers at significant places to counsel suicide-prone individuals. Also, authorities should restrict the availability of poisons only for agricultural purposes and limit the potency of poisons only for killing insects by adding an offensive odor to vomit in case of oral ingestion. Establishing poison treatment centers in major hospitals and mobile poison management units in inaccessible areas and training doctors in the management of poisoning can reduce the toll. Mental health consultation has to be ensured for all individuals admitted with suicide attempts. Strict control over the media against sensationalizing of suicides can reduce copycat suicides. Finally, more research is needed for the formulation of culturally specific suicide prevention strategies.

Conclusion

Farmers' suicides in India have been largely understood only from agricultural and economic perspectives. The mental health dimension is essential and needs to be understood. Mental health interventions have been lacking in most parts of India. This lacuna

should be addressed on a priority basis. "We must be the change; we wish to see" - Gandhiji.

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