

## **CRISIS IN AGRICULTURAL HEARTLAND: FARM SUICIDES IN MALWA REGION OF PUNJAB, INDIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Punjabi farmer suicides represent a broader problem related to the marginalization of the rural sector to the benefit of burgeoning towns and cities in the developing world. Studying and addressing this issue can provide important lessons for future rural development interventions and also serve as a reminder of the importance of holistic analysis of the many layers of human rights issues implicated in sudden economic expansion policies. Farmer suicides in post-conflict Punjab also represent how unfulfilled socio-economic rights can fuel both inward- and outward-facing violence and insecurity. Only through an immediate and a multi-staged response plan, combining policy changes by the Central and State Government with the guidance of civil society, can the Punjabi farmer truly bask in the reported glory of "India Rising".

### **INTRODUCTION**

India is an Agrarian country with around 60 per cent 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 Middleman have been leading to series of suicides committed by farmers across India especially in Punjab. The current spate of farmers suicides highlighted by the media first in Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh and now in Punjab, is certainly a disturbing phenomenon. Punjab is going to approach environmentalism, labour diversification, and its economic growth moving forward. It already boasts one of the highest unemployment rates in India, and despite its agricultural success, farmer livelihoods have been declining, resulting in a record number of farmer suicides. The various reasons, for suicides among Punjab farmers are perturbing enough to warrant a serious study. Hence there is need for an objective and systematic study of the incidence and causes of suicides in Punjab. Farmer suicides in Punjab expose the extreme rural plight that is otherwise shadowed by the prevalent narrative of "India Rising" – the billion-strong nation of India as one of the world's fastest-growing economies.

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 1960s and 1970s 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. During the Green Revolution, production was improved with the use of modified seeds that increased yield only when combined with expensive chemical fertilizers and irrigation. Unable to afford sufficient amounts of these expensive inputs, small farmers found their holdings becoming progressively less profitable. Meanwhile, grain prices remained comparatively low even as input costs increased. Now, three decades later, the small and marginal farmers of Punjab, in 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 a losing proposition in Indian Punjab, the farming heartland of South Asia for generations. In the present case, suicides among Punjab farmers have by all means become a public. Issue as these are no longer confined to isolated cases.

### **1.2 Research objectives**

To achieve the research objective, the following specific objectives were formulated:

1. To find out if there has been an increase in the incidence of suicide, particularly farmer's suicide in Punjab in the last 20 year.
2. To identify the distinctive socio-economic characteristics of the case of suicide.
3. To find out the relationship between indebtedness and suicide.

### 1.3 Research Methodology

In accordance with the objectives and research questions, the study were conducted in Rural Punjab (especially in Malwa region).The data have been drawn from Secondary sources. The main sources of secondary data are as follows:

- Census of India 2001and 2011
- National crime Record Bureau 2005
- Economical and Statistical Organisation; Punjab Statistical Abstract
- Punjab Police Statistics
- Newspaper reports on farmer's suicide.

On the basis of information gathered from the above sources, a macro context was develop which located in Punjab on all India scene of suicide and their causes identified the level of proneness of various districts of Punjab.

### 1.5 Limitations of the study

It is of course is never very easy to get at the objective reality but in the present study it was even more difficult because of the highly subjective nature of the problem of the study and the suicide victim being no more there to be examined. Under the circumstances we had to resort not only to cross check the information with various sources. These limitations notwithstanding, we have done our best to ensure the reliability of the information as well as its quality.

## 2. Study Area

Punjab – The state of Punjab located in North West India, bordering Pakistan extent from 29°32' to 32°32' North and 73°55' to 76°50' east. It is surrounded by the Indian states of Jammu and Kashmir in the north, the hilly state of Himachal Pradesh in the East by the state of Haryana and Rajasthan in the South. It covers geographical area of 50362 square kilometres and is one of the smallest states in India.



Fig.1

Socio Culturally, the state is classified into three regions – Majha, which is land between rivers Ravi and Beas; Doaba, which lies between rivers Satluj and Beas and Malwa the region south of river Satluj. Our study area is located in the Malwa region south, of river Satluj. The study area comprises nine districts of Malwa region in Punjab namely Sangrur, Barnala, Moga, Ferozpur, Fazilka, Faridkot, Muktsar, Bathinda and Mansa. The study area includes 2102 villages.



Fig.2

### 2.1 Size

The total area of the present Punjab is approximately 50,362 kilometres. The present Punjab comprises of 4 divisions, 22 districts, 77tehsils, 78 sub tehsils and 140 blocks. Punjab is inhabited by 12267 villages and 217 towns and cities of Punjab. The major cities of Punjab are Ludhiana, Amritsar, Jalandhar, Patiala, Mohali and Bathinda.

### 2.2 Climate

Punjab climate is characterized by extreme cold had extreme hot conditions. Annual temperatures in Punjab

range from  $-2$  to  $40$  °C (min/max), but can reach  $47$  °C ( $117$  °F) in summer and  $-4$  °C in winter. The northeast area lying near the foothills of the Himalayas receives heavy rainfall, whereas the area lying further south and west receives less rainfall and experiences higher temperatures. Average annual rainfall ranges between 960 mm in the sub-mountain region and 460 mm in the plains. Punjab has three seasons:

□ Summer Season (April to June), when temperature typically rise as high as  $110^{\circ}\text{F}$ .

□ Monsoon season (July to September), when a majority of rainfall occurs.

□ Winter Season (December to February), when temperature typically fall as low as  $40^{\circ}\text{F}$ .

There is a transitional period between winter and summer in March and early April, as well as a transitional season between monsoon season and winter in October and November

### 2.3 Drainage

In the primitive times Punjab was known as "Panchnada" the land of five rivers. Geographically, the drainage system of Punjab is quite complicated. At present three main rivers mainly Ravi, Beas and Sutlej flows through the Punjab. Along with these rivers Ghaggar, White Bein, Black Bein, Kiran Nala, Chakki Nala, and numberless chose too flow through Punjab.

### 2.4 Soil

The fertile plains of Punjab boast of producing about two-third of the food grains produced annually in India. This is largely owing to the fertile soil of the Punjab. Climatic differences result in a variety of soil which ultimately culminates into a wide range of crop and sand vegetation in Punjab.

South-western Punjab (Malwa Region) is mainly dominated by calcareous soil which includes the desert soil and sierozem soil. The pH value in this zone ranges from 7.8 to 8.5 and also have grey and red desert soil, regosol soil and alluvial soil. The soil of central Punjab ranges from sandy loam to clayey with pH value from 7.8 to 8.5 making alkalinity and salinity problematic for this place. The alluvial soil of this zone can be widely described as arid and brown soil or tropical arid brown soil. The soil in Eastern Punjab is loamy to clayey.

### 2.5 Relief

Relief leaves a deep impact on the environment, inhabitants and mode of living of the people in that area. Generally it is so opined that Punjab represents the vast flood plains of river Sutlej of the country, but the reality does not go exactly with this version.

To the geologist, Punjab has mainly the following geological formations:-

- Siwalik hill or sub mountain range
- The Kandi Region
- Great Alluvial Plains
- South – West sand dunes.

### Punjab - Land of Farmer's Suicide

Farmer suicides in Punjab expose the extreme rural plight that is otherwise shadowed by the prevalent narrative of "India Rising" – the billion-strong nation of India as one of the world's fastest-growing economies. 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 1960s and 1970s to aid developing counties 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. During the Green Revolution, production was improved with the use of modified seeds that increased yield only when combined with expensive chemical fertilizers and irrigation. Unable to afford sufficient amounts of these expensive inputs, small farmers found their holdings becoming progressively less profitable. Meanwhile, grain prices remained comparatively low even as input costs increased. Now, three decades later, the small and marginal farmers of Punjab, in 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 a losing proposition in Indian Punjab, the farming heartland of South Asia for generations.

In Indian Punjab, one various groups are reporting a significant number of farmer suicides. Movement against State Repression (MASR), an NGO working in Southern Punjab for the past two decades, has recorded 1,738 suicides in 91 Punjabi villages between 1988 and 2014. These 91 villages are from two sub-subdivisions of District Sangrur, one of the 22 districts of Punjab. MASR estimates at least 50,000 suicides have occurred across Punjab over the last two decades, though not all districts are equally affected.

Other sources support MASR's general estimates. A farmers' union, BhIntermediatries Kisan Union (BKU-Rajewal), estimates 90,000 suicides between 1990 and 2010. Also, a recent State Government-commissioned report by Punjab Agriculture University reports 2,990 suicides in the two Districts – 1256 in Bathinda and 1634 in Sangrur between 1990 and 2010. This report comes within a Punjab government's decision to fix a

price for the Farmer suicides- Rs 2 lakh to the families of those farmers who have committed suicides in the past one year.

This is approximately one suicide every day. About 87 per cent of them were small farmers and agricultural labourers. This report, more or less like a household census, is considered to be the first authentic survey documenting the spate of suicides among farmers and agricultural workers. In Sangrur district, 738 farmers who took the fatal path to escape growing indebtedness, had an average outstanding debt of Rs 3.36 lakh per farmer. For another lot of 246 farmers who committed suicide for other reasons, the average outstanding amount standing against their name was Rs 79,935. As far as farm labourers are concerned, the average debt was Rs 70,036. In Bathinda, the average outstanding due against farmers who could not sustain the growing indebtedness, was Rs 2.94 lakh. As many as 550 farmers belonged to this category. For another lot of 223 farmers who too committed suicide but for other reasons, the average outstanding debt was Rs 85,825. For the workers, the outstanding amount against their name was Rs 47,347 on an average. The report also provides a list of such households.

#### **For instances: A Case Study**

1. Najam Singh in Mansa district committed suicide in the year 2000 by drowning. He had got his sister married and his younger brother too and his loans were over Rupees 3 lakh. When the Intermediaries or commission agent refused to give him more loans, he simply committed suicide.
2. Mithu Singh of the same district consumed poison on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2004 after returning from a meeting with the Intermediaries. He sold his land and got nothing from the Intermediaries as it was considered to be loan repayment. He simply could not take the humiliation and the poverty.
3. In 2001, Jasbeer Singh from Sangrur district owned 3.5 acres and his debts were over Rupees 3 lakh, including the purchase of a truck on loan. He was unable to pay the instalments. The recovery agent had come to his house that day and claimed the truck back. They drove the truck away, which skidded and fell near a pit. Jasbeer Singh was returning home when he saw this from a distance. He rushed to his room and consumed the dreaded pesticide from humiliation or hopelessness or perhaps.

4. In August 2005, 23 year old Dhyan Singh in Sangrur district came from the fields complaining that his stomach was hurting badly. He had already consumed the 'spray'. It was too late to save him. He had a loan of rupees 6000 already and was trying to take a fresh loan. The marriage expenses of his sister were weighing on Dhyan Singh's mind of her son's death, the mother took another loan of Rupees 1 lakh for agricultural purposes. With the help of this new loan she paid part of the earlier loan and also got her daughter married.

5. In 2007, 31 year old Satnam Singh of Ferozepur district consumed poison. Although the couple has been married for more than 10 years and was also greatly troubled by their childlessness, the situation was triggered by his sister 'wedding, which obliged him to arrange for the dowry money, that was only four months before the suicide.

#### **3.1 Why is Farmers Committing Suicide?**

The suicides in Punjab are the result of mental stress and this mental stress is most often caused by poverty and especially by indebtedness. Indebtedness and the inability to earn enough income to relief the debt will assault the farmers feeling of self-esteem and respect. In many cases the individuals who committed suicide where responsible for the income and this debt created the feeling that they we incapable of taking care of their loved ones and themselves. This feeling has brought shame upon them and might even have confirmed for them the idea of being backward or underdeveloped. Once this has entered their minds it accumulates and creates a heavy mental burden. It is important to note that it is most likely that most farmers who committed suicide probably blamed themselves for their poverty and indebtedness. The newly introduced farming system has increased cost of production which in turn has led to the indebtedness and the disturbance of the harmony within farmers themselves. These suicides as these acts are showing us that the agricultural system that had been introduced as part of a development, project has failed for especially the weaker parts of Indian society i.e agricultural labourers, marginal and small farmers. In India the marginal and small farmers are being passively sacrificed in the name of progress and policymakers with their lack of creativity and their narrow economic thinking are unable or maybe unwilling to resolve this major crisis although it is happening right underneath their eyes. There near not be a one track solution to the agrarian crisis and steps should be taken that fit the profile of the diverse needs of small and large farmers. Modern farming and focus

on marketing might bring prosperity to a few farmers but it is not the solution for all farmers.

### 3.3 Characteristics of Suicide Victims

1. Indebtedness was reported major cause of suicides by 30 per cent of the victims' families following by conflict at home and poor financial position of the house.
2. Around 86 per cent of the victims were actually under debt.
3. Majority of the suicide victims were small and marginal farmers.
4. Majority of the suicide victims were illiterates or semi-literate.
5. A vast majority of the victims belonged to young and middle age groups.
6. Majority of the suicide victims had borrowed money from informal credit agencies and for consumptive purposes. Declining income due to ever increasing cost of production and stagnant farm productivity output prices and high amount of debt were reported to be major causes for non-payment of loans.

### 3.4 Causes of Farmer Suicide

Rapid Increase in Debt.  
Repeated Crop Failures  
Lack of Alternative Sources of Income  
Absence of Financial Institutional  
Money Lenders  
Lack of Direct Subsidies  
Lack of Crop Insurance  
Rapid increase in cost of seed, Fertilizers and Pesticide and Fuel Costs  
Sinking water-table and overall rapidly declining profitability  
We can draw the following causes of the suicides of the farmers:

1. The major reason for the suicides is the heavy indebtedness that the cultivators find themselves. This heavy indebtedness is not an overnight phenomenon that has occurred suddenly. It has its roots in the credit policy that has been followed over a number of years.
2. The indebtedness itself results from a mismatch in the cost of production and the support price and the market price that the cultivators are receiving at the end of every cropping cycle.
3. There has been repeated crop failure in the every year. This crop failure has resulted in a reduction in the productivity of the land due to a variety of reasons. These reasons could be due overuse of fertilizers,

pesticides and reliance on HYV(High Yielding Variety) seeds and now to some extent on the genetically modified seeds such as the Bt. Cotton. Thus, the crop failure becomes a cyclical phenomenon and not a one-time occurrence.

4. Heavy indebtedness is spreading across the landholding patterns. The small and the medium sized cultivator is the most affected of the lot, though the large land holder in the rain fed areas of the state too is coming under strain.
5. The access to information base that the cultivators have largely comes from the agents of the fertilizer and seed companies. The government extension machinery is not visible in the sense that it can provide an objective data base in information to the cultivators.
6. Availability of credit, even after 55 years of Independence, private money lending remains the single largest sources of credit to small and marginal farmers. This is so because the banking sector is fast moving out of the credit delivery mechanism.

7. Technological change as having played an instrumental role in the problem. In Punjab showed dramatic misuse of agricultural chemicals in farmer households in the absence of guidance on how to correctly use these deadly chemicals and linked it to the chemicals were in widespread use.

### 3.5 Suicide Trends in Punjab

An analysis of macro data, as detailed above, indicate the following distinct trends;

- Punjab's suicide rate is much lower in comparison with other Indian states like Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Karnataka.
- A sharp increase in the suicide rate in Punjab coincides with the post- 1992 phase.
- Suicide rate among the cultivators is high as compared with non cultivators.
- Suicide-prone districts in Punjab are Sangrur, Barnala, Bathinda, Mansa, Ferozepur and Faridkot.
- A higher proneness among farmers has been noted in Sangrur, Bathinda, Barnala, Mansa and Ferozepur districts.
- No seasonal spate of suicides as these incidents is spread over the whole year.

## 4. Analysis of Study

The number of farmers and agricultural labours committing suicide has been growing in the recent past especially during 1995 to 2005. But it is difficult to arrive at the exact estimate of suicides in the rural areas

especially by the poor farmers and agricultural labours. Most of the suicide cases are not reported or registered to the police because the rural people do not appreciate this. This is the reason for lack of proper statistics of suicide case. The estimates proposed by various individual and organisation are mostly guesstimate. Most of these estimates are based on incidence of suicides in Sangrur, Mansa and Bathinda districts. These districts show a high trend among farmers to commit suicide compared to other districts of the state. There are number systematic studies as yet conducted in Punjab to cover all districts of the state to arrive at accurate estimate of such suicide cases.

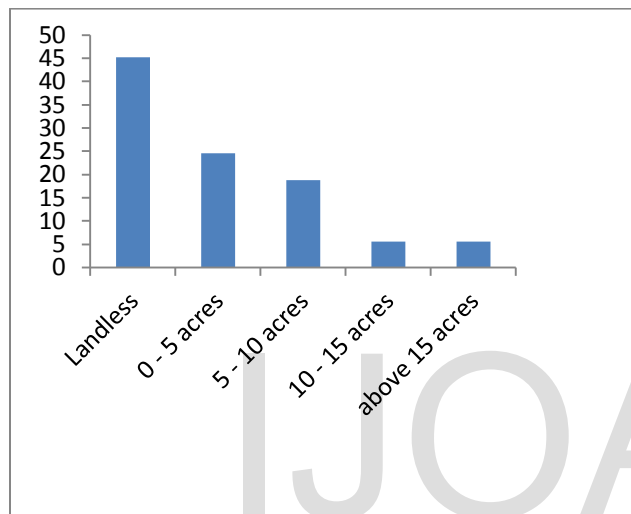


Fig.3: Farmer suicides cases

The personal report by Bhalla examined following 45.20 percent of the victims were landless labourer on the other hand 24.50 percent small and marginal farmers (0-5 acre land holding) whereas 18.80 percent lower medium farmers (5-10 acre land holding) as well as 5.60 percent medium farmers (10-15 acre land holding) and 5.60 percent large farmers (above 15 acre land holding)

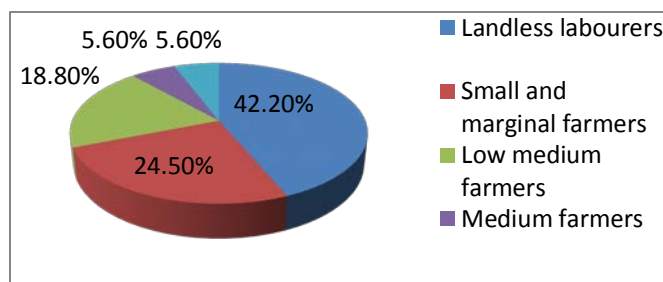


Fig.4: Victims of Suicides

Report from leading newspapers in the region (The Tribune, Indian Express, The Hindu, Business Standards and Hindustan times) Focused on this issue and made public aware of organisations attempted to mobilise the peasantry on this issue and linked it to the problem of indebtness and especially to debt trap among the farmers. This report showed that agricultural labourers and poor peasantry or farmers accounted for 70 percent of the suicides from the conformed cases in the villages.

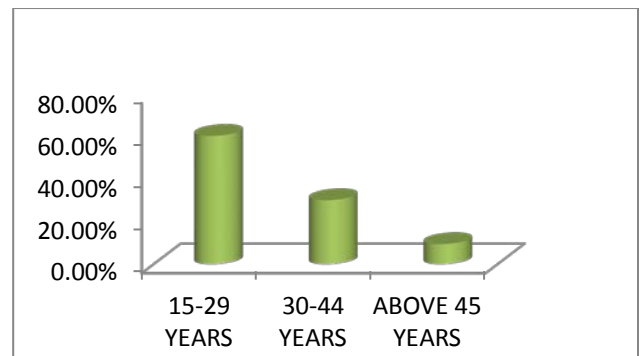


Fig.4: Age Group of Victim

It is further brought out that the majority of the victims about 60.30 percent belonged to young person in the age group of 15-29 years. 30.20 percent belonged to young persons in the age group of 30-44 years.

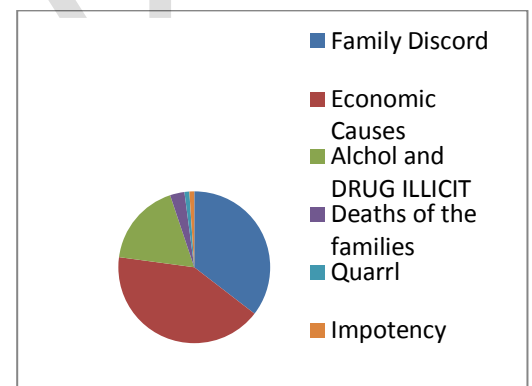


Fig.5: Causes of family suicides

Remaining 9.5 percent of cases belonged to age group above 45 years. In terms of educational attainment 58.5 percent of the cases belonged to illiterates. 11.3 percent to primary level 11.3 percent to middle level of schooling and matriculation above constituted 18.9 percent of the total cases. The study reported that the largest cause of suicides was family discord accounting for 35.79 percent of the suicides whilst alcohol and illicit drugs used caused 17.89 percent of the suicides. The economic causes, such as Indebtness (17.89 percent), Loss of status (16.84 percent), Lack of

resources (6.32 percent), Crop failure (1.05 percent) Accounted for 42.10 percent of the suicides. Apart from these, Suicides were caused by death in the family (3.10 percent), Quarrel with in laws (1.05 percent) Impotency (1.05 percent).

The victims were generally from families of agriculture labourers and poor cultivators, lack of education and had low level of schooling were young in age and poor in terms of resource endowment. This report brought out not only primary of economic districts among the multiplicity of economic causes leading to suicide. At the same time, it linked economic and non-economic failure with each working to the disadvantage of the victim. Punjab now has an official figure for farm suicides due to debt in the decade 2000-2011. In their survey report submitted to the Punjab revenue department, three state universities have put the figure of debt-related suicides at 4,688 in 20 districts. According to the report, 1,743 (37 per cent) of these suicides were committed by labour working on farms, while the remaining 2,945 were by farmers with small landholdings.

It is the first survey documenting the spate of suicides among farmers and agricultural workers in the first half of the decade, mainly in the cotton belt of Malwa following successive crop failures. A staggering 63 per cent of these suicides took place in three districts of Sangrur, Mansa and Bathinda. Sangrur reported 1,132 cases between the years 2000 to 2008, followed by Mansa, which witnessed 1,013 cases, including highest number (414) of suicides by farm workers. Bathinda is third with 827 cases followed by comparatively smaller district of Barnala, which reported 532 cases. Other districts with three-digit figures on farm suicides due to high debt are Ludhiana (344), Moga (292), Patiala (126) and Muktsar (102), the home turf of ruling Badals. The non-cotton growing belt comprising Mohali, Fatehgarh Sahib, Nawanshahar, Jalandhar, Kapurthala and border districts of Ferozepur, Amritsar, Gurdaspur and Tarn Taran have reported double-digit figures. In two districts, Hoshiarpur and Roopnagar, the number of cases is seven and four, respectively. "We found that 80 per cent of farmers who committed suicides had small landholdings. Their borrowings for meeting household and farm costs and piling up interest made the debt unsustainable. The suicide graph rose sharply between years 1997 to 2003 in the cotton belt before BT cotton was introduced. In Sangrur and Bathinda, the two districts which saw one of the highest numbers of cases, no suicide has been reported after 2008," says Dr Sukhpal Singh of the Punjab Agricultural University,

Ludhiana, which surveyed the main suicide-hit six districts. The Guru Nanak Dev University, which has surveyed seven districts, including the border belt, has also attributed high farm debt to use of liquor, drugs besides treatment of diseases such as cancer and lavish spending on family functions. After the compilation of the report, the revenue department has this month released Rs 30 crore to deputy commissioners in districts. The Punjab finance minister in the 2012-13 budget had allocated Rs 30 crore – Rs 2 lakh for each suicide-hit family. The first instalment of Rs 1 lakh will be paid this year and the second the next year. Since, the amount budgeted is short of the figure of suicides - the first instalment for 4,688 families would require Rs 47 crore – the revenue department has requisitioned for additional funds. On tackling rural debts, the state government has not heeded the advice of its own advisory body, Punjab Farmers Commission, which has cited the system of payment to farmers through commission agents as a root cause of vicious debt cycle saying agents pay farmers for their produce after deducting loans and interest calculated at rates much higher than market.

#### According to study

- 83.6 percent of the suicides were caused by purely economic factors namely economic hardship and indebtness(15.2 percent)
- Economic hardship and crop failure(2.5 percent)
- Economic hardship, indebtness and crop failure(16.5 percent)
- Indebtness and crop failure(10.1 percent)
- Addiction to drug only 1 suicide (1.3 percent)
- Individual reasons or family tension lead to 5 suicides

Remaining suicide was caused by economic hardships, indebtness and drug or alcohol addiction. These above studies bring out that the suicide cases among poor peasants and agricultural labours spread over all the three reasons of Punjab i.e Malwa, Doaba and Majha but there is high concentration of such cases in their districts of Malwa. These districts are Sangrur, Mansa and Bathinda.

These suicides are predominantly caused by economic distress and indebtness. The following distinct trends emerged from the above analysis;

- Limitations of the 'grain revolution' and lack of inner dynamism to build-up forward and backward inter-sectorial linkages.
- Decline in the size of operational holdings and fragmentation of land and pauperization of the small and marginal farmers.
- Decline in the growth rate of crop productivity.
- Increase in input costs and corresponding fall in income of the small and marginal farmers.
- Higher share of debt of small and marginal farmers.
- Higher concentration of debt in Bathinda and Mansa zone.
- Low literacy rate in Sangrur, Bathinda and Mansa.
- Manifold increase in conspicuous consumption expenditure like alcohol, drug addiction etc. Diversion of economic resources to social celebrations and to meet immediate needs.
- Raise 'money' through easily available credit and spend it on consumer goods and conspicuous consumption.
- Mismatch between preference and aptitude of the youth and between their aspirations and capabilities.

### 5.1 Measures adopted by the Government

The Punjab State Government has only recently begun acknowledging the farmer suicide problem, which it previously dismissed as non-existent. The state has set up a pension fund for these windows but not all have received it. And, in any case, it is Minimal at Rupees 250 per month. The co-operative bank may be made the nodal agency. At the village level the scheme should be implemented through primary agriculture cooperative societies. An expert group having representatives of the Provident Fund Commissioner, Agricultural Department, Co-operative Department and the bank may be constituted. A credit card scheme for farmers may be introduced in the suicide prone districts in the first phase on an experimental basis. A special plan for self-employment of women and unemployed youths among the small and marginal farmers and landless labourers should be evolved. Those who are responsible for the agrarian crisis are being asked to provide solutions

In a recent interview with this newspaper, agricultural scientist MS Swaminathan rightly warned, "If agriculture goes wrong, nothing else will go right." With over 2.9 lakh farmers ending their lives across the country in the past 15 years, and now with reports of about two farmers committing suicide every day in Punjab, we are staring at a grave crisis on the farm front. The problem has now extended its deadly reach to Punjab, India's food bowl. Amid reports of a record harvest of wheat and rice, the state increasingly faces a terrible agrarian crisis. The paradoxical situation is reflected in an alarming rate of farm suicides. A study jointly conducted by Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana, Punjabi University, Patiala, and Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, estimates that more than 7,000 farmers and farm workers have taken their lives in the past 10 years. While farmers are being blamed for low crop productivity, which is leading to distress, in Punjab it is just the opposite. Despite high productivity, heavy mechanisation and a massive application of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, farmers are at the receiving end. Strangely, suicides are happening in a state which has more than 95% cultivable area under assured irrigation. There is something terribly wrong here.

Like elsewhere in the country, mounting indebtedness has been cited as the main reason. While input prices have risen tremendously over the past two decades, farm prices have more or less remained stagnant, if one were to adjust for inflation. The United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) data shows that farm gate prices internationally have remained frozen for the past decade. Under such harsh economic conditions, it is futile to expect intensive farming, based on high application of external inputs, to turn profitable for farmers. Heavy mechanisation has remained the bane of Punjab's agriculture. It crossed the threshold level long ago. Acute paucity of farm labour is visible but to promote sophisticated and expensive machinery to address the labour shortage problem has not paid off well. Take, for instance, the case of tractors. There was a time when the tractor was a symbol of pride. Today it has turned into a symbol for suicide. At a time when every second farmer household owns a tractor, about 20,000 big tractors, now of 60-90 horse power, are sold every year. Instead of setting up small farmers' cooperatives and companies for custom hiring, the thrust is on subsidising expensive machines for individual farmers to buy. Though now the focus is on shifting at least 12 lakh hectare land from paddy to maize and other cash crops in order to reduce pressure on groundwater, a 'more of the same' technological approach is unlikely



to address the fundamental problem of growing unsustainability. It is well recognised that much of the crisis in sustainability is the outcome of excessive use and abuse of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, which cause irreparable damage to soil, water, the environment and human health. With the average consumption exceeding 6,900 tonnes per year, Punjab is the largest consumer of chemical pesticides in India. I have seen farmers growing crops without pesticides in a separate portion of their farms for personal consumption. But for the markets, they literally douse the crop in pesticides.

In a study, the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the Philippines had some time ago concluded that there was no need to spray pesticides in rice. Farmers in the Philippines, Vietnam, Bangladesh and India have produced better rice crops without using chemical pesticides. At least a beginning could have been made to reduce pesticide consumption in rice. Similarly, in the case of cotton, which consumes more than 50% of the total pesticides applied, the emphasis has remained on promoting the sale of genetically-modified BT cotton seeds. Still, pesticide consumption is on the upswing. Intensive farming has promoted excessive mining of groundwater. As a result, more than 4.5 lakh submersible pumps have been installed to pump out water from a depth below 300 ft. The alarm bells on drying aquifers have gone unheard. Till efforts are made to revisit the farming strategy and make corrective decisions based on the underlying promise of restoring sustainability and enhancing economic viability, I don't see a bright future for farming in Punjab. The tragedy is that those who are responsible for the crisis are being asked to provide solutions.

### 5.2 Suggestion

1. Raise the awareness: Articles in newspapers, magazines, documentaries, songs, blogs, you tube etc, let us educate ourselves on the issue and increase the decibel level.
2. Generate Employment: The debt-trapped farmers, their families, families of those farmers who have committed suicide are all seeking employment. There are no industries in that poverty struck areas. But these are hardworking people and employment should get.
3. Educate the farmers: Educate the farmers about the pitfalls of borrowing money from the profit sharks. Make or sponsor radio ads to counter the radio ads by the profit sharks. Work with high risk farmers to steer them away from contemplating and committing suicide.

4. Organization: The organization also has a program that actively adopts families who have a family member commit suicide and provides them with practical education to help them overcome some of the barriers they face

5. Guiding and helping the farmer in the proper implementation of organic farming techniques.
6. Helping the policy maker and administration to come forward with sound policies to help the farmers.
7. To plan setting up of family, health and career counselling centres.

### 5.3 Recommendations

Given the various long-term ramifications of the urgent problem of farmer suicides, swift and holistic policy changes are imperative. These must, of course, be accompanied by civil society action for societal change. The government cannot wait on its hands for social change, which is by nature slow and painstaking. At the same time, governmental policy changes alone will not provide the silver bullet. In order to provide a realistic timeline for progressive, holistic, and lasting change, the following recommendations are divided into immediate, medium, and long-term action All of the below need to be part of a concerted effort on all levels and are envisioned to be implemented in a five-year timeframe.

**State and Central Government must recognize suicides in Punjab and no limit their response to questioning the accuracy of the statistics:** The estimates provided by various groups, including a study sponsored by the Punjab Agricultural University<sup>79</sup> at the Punjab Government's own request, has verified beyond any doubt that the problem of farmer suicides in Punjab is by no means insignificant. While the Governments can continue challenging the true extent of the problem, this must not continue to be their sole response. The Centre and State can agree to disagree with civil society organizations on the estimates, but must create and implement specific responses to the documented and fully established cases of suicide.

**Families of farmers who have committed suicides should be provided compensation:** Given the plight of the surviving family members and the disturbing phenomenon of multiple suicides within one family (where the accumulation of debt leads to successive family members committing suicide), the Central Government must provide short-term compensation

packages to Punjabi families of farmers who have committed suicides, as it has done for other states. Some critics allege that such compensation might encourage suicides. Not only do villagers find such logic contemptuous of the value they place on their lives and dismissive of the deep desperation that leads to suicides, but such an argument also ignores how compensation can help in alleviating pressures that lead to various disturbing trends in the deceased's family, including multiple suicides.

**Informal money-lenders should be regulated in a way that does not eradicate their business:** While the money-lender is an integral part of Punjabi agriculture and cannot be eradicated without risking a credit vacuum in these villages, both the Centre and State governments can impose regulations on money-lenders similar to the previous British legislation that limited the interest rate, instituted a ceiling on payback amounts, protected against land alienation, and shielded farmers' primary assets. Also, Debt Conciliation Boards may be set up as dispute resolution mechanisms in situations where loans have been given at exorbitant interest rates and have no prospect of repayment. While the broader legislation regulating money-lending might need to come from the Centre, the State Government's active involvement will be crucial for its enforcement and effectiveness

**Crop prices should be attached to the national price index:** Currently the MSPs for the crops are too low, resulting in little or no profits by Punjabi farmers. The MSP should be set according to the national price index, which is adjusted for inflation every six months and dictates all other prices in the country.

**Civil society organizations should partake in suicide prevention education:** The melancholy and sense of resignation in the suicide-affected villages and surrounding areas is palpable. Civil society campaigns should engage with villagers to explain options and the long-term ramifications of suicide on the farmer's family. Of course, realistic options and true alternatives can only be promised once the Immediate-Term Recommendations have been implemented. These campaigns should bring psychological and cultural issues underlying suicides to the fore. For example, the shame related to having large unplayable loans has been repeatedly cited as a reason for suicide. While such social pressures and prejudices cannot be removed overnight, the village community should be steadily shifting towards change. Villagers must be encouraged to stand by each other in solidarity since nearly every small and marginal farming family is

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undergoing similar pressures of high input costs and low returns from agriculture.

**The Canter should pay Punjab's farming electricity bill:** Currently, the main subsidy to Punjabi farmers who provide a significant amount to the national food grain pool is that they don't have to pay for electricity (that is used primarily for tube wells and irrigation). The Punjab State pays for this electricity, amounting to over 2,500 crore Rupees, which effectively creates a consumer subsidy for India sourced from the Punjab pocket. Given Punjab's high contribution to the Central grain pool, the Central Government can politically justify providing this special concession to Punjab. Freeing up this funding would allow more State funds to be dedicated to improving the rural agrarian condition. It would also remove some of the distrust and disgruntlement that Punjabi farmers harbour against the Central Government.

**Formal/institutional credit sources (government and private) should be increase:** A dearth of formal sources vests immense power in the hands of the informal money-lenders. This power allows for the vicious system of abuse that contributes to the suicides. While informal money-lenders cannot be replaced quickly, more formal lending sources will help create healthy competition for the money-lenders as well as alert their borrowers to fair practices.

**Pension fund and crop insurance should be created for farmers:** Such measures would provide a security net for farmers in the case of serious loss due to environmental factors. Otherwise, losses of one bad crop year accumulate quickly and create the desperate situations that might prompt suicide.

**The Punjab water dispute must be resolved:** This is a priority long-term solution. The water dispute fuelled unrest and militancy in Punjab in the 1970s and 1980s, which may possibly resurge if the issue is not resolved. This issue is at the heart of existing Tensions between the Centre and the State, and is also associated with memories of violence, militancy, and counter-insurgency. Even relying on the Supreme Court to decide this matter is not advisable, since the Supreme Court's involvement in the issue has been seen by Punjab as discriminatory and unconstitutional (see previous discussion). In accordance with international riparian laws, the Central government must resolve this dispute together with the people of Punjab. The current system adversely affects the farming industry in the state and has brought catastrophic long-term effects on the state's water table. The Central

government must reassess its policies towards the redirection of Punjab's water in light of the current water deficit in Punjab, which will likely only worsen in the future. It needs to reopen negotiations with Punjab state officials to come to a mutually amenable accord.

**Industrialization should be increased in the region:** In North India, development has been along the main corridor of the Grand Trunk Road. This corridor does not pass through the centre of the state of Punjab and the area's most affected by suicides. On the ground, this translates to paucity in alternate employment. Agriculture does not involve labour at all times of the year. Alternatives to agriculture in these areas, such as factories, can successfully absorb surplus agro-labour. Both the Central and State Government must play a role in increasing industrialization. For decades, the Central Indian Government has reasoned that Punjab was too close to the India-Pakistan border and industrial development would prove hazardous should there be another outbreak of conflict between the two nations. The Central Planning Commission should now reevaluate its decision to disallow industrialization of Punjab, considering that modern methods of warfare further dissociate the level of threat from the distance to the border. The State Government can meanwhile encourage industry in the suicide-affected districts by providing subsidies and incentives for new investors.

**Civil society and the State Government should work on (i) Social Education on dowry and other consumption spending and (ii) Education sector improvements**

While social progress is put forth as a first priority by government officials and privileged sections of society, changing social norms is a long-term effort. This process will not take place overnight and cannot exist in isolation—dowry and wedding spending cannot be eradicated from the villages when it is taking place unabated in cities and promoted in mainstream media, including the giant Indian film industry of Bollywood. For the farmers committing suicide, dowry and other excessive spending are sometimes precipitating factors for suicide—but not the underlying factor. The State Government also should play a stronger role in: better enforcing teacher attendance at schools; providing incentives for low-income families to increase student attendance; and creating vocational training centres. These initiatives will increase the prospects of the next generation to expand beyond farming into other careers.

## Conclusion

All quite understandable as long as we do not stop there but go on to educate ourselves on the issue and work towards the reconstruction. It is clear from the current crisis, however, that the agrarian interest is much more marginalized in the national policy agenda today. The areas with high incidence of farmers and agricultural labourers especially Sangrur (particularly Adana and Lehragaga blocks), Mansa and Bathinda (Rampura Phul) need special attention. It is well known fact that the area around the Ghaggar River have shown high prowess toward suicides. This is because of regular flooding of the areas causing regular crop failure, leading to economic hardship and high indebtedness. At the same time, this belt is also a cotton growing belt. This crop has been facing devastating pest attacks, largely uncontrolled by pesticides. The whole of this regional belt is educationally the most backward in the state. As a long term measure, educational infrastructure need to be strengthened and rural schools especially must be made functional. It is not only literacy which matters but mean years of schooling which is crucial. Higher educational attainments empower individuals to understand their surroundings and change the environment favourably. This area is not only educationally backward but lacks under urban linkages especially employment opportunities compared to the area around Amritsar-Delhi National Highway. Overall development of the region would require an area development approach. This requirement is not merely for economic development, it must be participatory in nature so as to distribute its benefits to the disadvantage sectors of society without this development suicides among the poor peasant and agricultural labourers cannot be controlled in long run. In this task social movements and their pressure that make governments attend the problem. Ultimately it is for civil society and government to respond positively and take preventive and curative measure.

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