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RESEARCH ARTICLE

FARMERS SUICIDE IN INDIA: A NEGLECTED REALITY

*Anish Chandran

Guest Lecturer, Department of Economics, Ayyankali Memorial Arts and Science College, Pathanapuram, Kerala

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ABSTRACT

“The real cause of hunger is the powerlessness of the poor to gain access to the resources they need to feed themselves.”-Frances Moore Lappe India is primarily an agrarian country where around 55 percent of the population depending on agriculture as their livelihood. The very popular “Lal Bahadur Shastri’s slogan “Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan” highlighted and stressed the importance of farmers in the country. According to the 2011 census, around 68.84% of Indians lives in rural areas. Majority of people in India are still dependent on farming for their livelihoods. 54.6% of the total workforce in India (263 million, is engaged in the agriculture sector. The latest data shows that the sector contributes only 13.7 percent to the overall GDP of India, as compared to 52% in 1950- 51, highlighting that relative productivity in agriculture has declined dramatically.. Several economists have claimed that farmers are the most vulnerable group in the country. The misguided priority of the policy makers resulted in the collapse of agriculture sector in the country. The strategies of inclusive growth and financial inclusion are limited in papers only as far as the conditions of poor farmers are concerned. The farmers indebtedness is found to be the main cause behind farmers suicide in India The farmer’s suicide rates are much higher than that of others in the country.

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INTRODUCTION

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) in its 49th Annual Report on Accidental Death and Suicides in India (2015) provides evidence that the number of farmers committing suicide rose more than 41 per cent in 2015 over 2014. The Centre informed the Supreme Court of India that despite a multi-pronged approach to improve income and social security of farmers, over 12,000 suicides were reported in the agricultural sector every year since 2013. The farmers indebtedness is found to be the main cause behind farmers suicide. In 2007, the Radhakrishna Committee on Agricultural Indebtedness appointed by the ministry of finance emphasized in its report that farm indebtedness is the prime cause for farmer’s suicide. Farm indebtedness still continues to trigger farm suicides in the country. The non-availability of agricultural credit is reportedly causing the pace of farmers suicide. The 1960’s and 70’s marked an important period in the history of Indian Agriculture with the arrival of ‘White’ and ‘Green’ revolution. This new strategy implemented modern techniques like high-yielding varieties of crops, multiple cropping, modern farm practices and spread of irrigation facilities.

The biggest achievement of this strategy was the attainment of self-sufficiency in food grains (Rao, 1996). The Green Revolution favored expensive technological investments for the “best endowed farmers in the best endowed areas, and directed away from resource prudent options of the small farmer in resource scarce regions”. Because of scarce resources, competition increased among farmers further widening gaps between social classes as well as geographical regions. In the 1970’s and 80’s a large number of small farms, unable to keep up with the competition, shut down. (Shiva 1993). Indian government introduced technological revolution in agriculture sector during late 1960’s. The so called green revolution helped in raising food grains production in the country. With the introduction of high yielding seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides and better irrigation facilities, the entire cropping environment witnessed a drastic change. But the coverage of green revolution was very limited. The technological revolution mainly focused on Harayana, Western Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. The poor farmers were not able to utilize the opportunities of green revolution. Being illiterate and poor, they were not able to adopt new technology, fertilizers and irrigation facilities. In order to compete, small farmers turned to high-cost seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, believing in easier and huge returns. There has been minimal financial support from the government for small farmers. They remained in the vicious circle eventhough the sector made a dramatic growth.

*Corresponding author: Anish Chandran,

Guest Lecturer, Department of Economics, Ayyankali Memorial Arts and Science College, Pathanapuram, Kerala.

Table 1. Farmers Suicides as a percentage of total suicide in India

Sl.No	Year	Total suicides	Farmers suicide	Farmers suicide as a percent of total suicides
1	1995	89178	10720	12
2	1996	88241	13729	15.6
3	1997	95829	13622	14.2
4	1998	104713	16015	15.3
5	1999	110587	16082	14.5
6	2000	108593	16603	15.3
7	2001	108506	16415	15.1
8	2002	110417	17971	16.3
9	2003	110579	17143	15.5
10	2004	113697	18241	16
11	2005	113914	17131	15
12	2006	118112	17060	14.4
13	2007	122637	16632	13.6
14	2008	125017	16196	13
15	2009	127151	17368	13.7
16	2010	134599	15964	11.9
17	2011	135585	14027	10.3
18	2012	135445	13754	10.2
19	2013	134799	11,772	8.7
20	2014	109456	12,360	11.3
21	2015	133623	12,602	9.43

Source: National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB)

The increase in profitability of agriculture caused many landlords to take a new interest in farming, evicting tenants so that they may farm the land themselves. This made less land available to small farmers, as large farmers and landlords were increasingly repossessing the land for their own use. Even if they did not evict the tenant, many times landlords would charge higher rent or crop share or rotate the tenants among the different plots of land so they were not able to acquire any rights to their land (Singh 1984). The rapid increase in the cultivation cost of various crops has been a main problem for farmers in the last three decades. The liberalization policy of government in 1991 paved the way for the bad performance of the agricultural sector. Indian government was forced to adopt the liberal policy under Structural Adjustment Programme in the wake of economic crisis of 1991. Since the introduction of economic reforms in India, the agricultural sector was neglected. The neo-liberal policies stood for industrial and service sector of the country. 26 years of economic reforms have given farmers access to expensive and promising biotechnology. These reforms have not led to crop insurance, land irrigation, or enough bank loans. Reforms opened Indian farmers to global competition. The Rangarajan Committee on Financial Inclusion (2008) pointed out that around 66 percent of the marginal farmers are continuously depending on informal sources of credit. The Report of the Task Force on Credit-Related Issues of Farmers (2009) also came with the same finding that the dominance of moneylenders has been continuing even after the introduction of doubling of farm credit policy. The data published by the Commission for Agriculture Costs and Prices (CACP) regarding the cost of cultivation of different crops shows that most of the food grain and non-food grain crops in the country have incurred losses right from the early 1990s onwards.

Why farmers suicide in India?

Farmers' suicides are the most tragic and dramatic symptom of the crisis of survival faced by Indian farmers. Rapid increase in indebtedness is at the prime reason of farmers' taking their lives. Debt is the indication of a negative economy. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), a total of 284,694 Indian farmers have committed suicide in the last 18 years.

The rate of suicides among farmers is 47% higher than the general population. And, in addition, the suicide mortality rate between 1996 and 2005 amongst male farmers is 26% higher when compared to male non-farmers (Mishra 2007). The actual counts of farmers suicides are much more higher than the official data. A majority of the farmers suicides were concentrated in five major agricultural states of the India namely Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Chhattisgarh.

The major reasons for farmers suicides in India are:

- **Financial Crisis and Economic Debt**– The financial pressure related to the farm crisis and climatic variations (drought and flood) which add to the economic problem. The ultimate result is that the farmers are not in a condition to run their day to day activities. The study shows that 90 percent of the farmers suicides were related to debt and financial pressures. The pathetic situation is that about 80 % of the farmers debts ranges between one to 3 lakhs. More than 200,000 farmers have taken their lives since 1997. On average, there has been one farmer's suicide every 32 minutes since 2002.
- **Impact of Neo liberal policies on agricultural sector**– Most of the studies show that the introduction of neo liberal policy in India paved the way for the decline of importance of agriculture sector. The liberalization, privatization and globalization policy of India which was introduced in 1991 as a part of structural adjustment programme suggested by Bretton Woods sisters neglected the primary sector. The supports and subsidies given to the agriculture sector were taken away and manufacturing and services sector were given priority. The neglect of the agriculture sector by policy makers is perceived to have caused a huge strain on the rural economy of the country. Apart from having economic impacts, this has started showing serious social implication on the lives of farmers. The general dissatisfaction amongst farmers has culminated in a serious social issue in the form of farmers suicides.

The Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) with World Trade Organization also was a setback to Indian farmers. The agreement stood for the reduction of subsidies to farmers. The

WTO listed the subsidies under three boxes (Green, Blue and Amber box). The Green and Blue box subsidies are non trade distortion subsidies, so no commitment required. The Amber Box subsidies are trade distortion subsidies and the member countries are committed to reduce those subsidies. The subsidies like minimum support price, direct subsidies are listed under Amber box. More than 75% of subsidies of Indian government are under Amber box subsidies. The New Economic Reforms along with Agreement on Agriculture stood against the weak and poor farmers.

- **Climatic changes-** Between 1967 and 2013, along with data on agricultural crop yields and on temperature change, warming temperature trends over the last three decades have already been responsible for over 59,000 suicides throughout India (National Crime Records Bureau). Climatic condition is changing because of floods, droughts and global warming in the atmosphere. The irregular rain resulted in crop failure and the farmers are left with nothing. The fewer crops yield which is not sufficient and enough and they bear the financial strain, which in turn leads to poverty. The farmers who cultivate the crops, unfortunately, they remain hungry.
- **Lack of formal credit facility-** Majority of the marginal farmers are not getting credit from formal banking system, forcing farmers to turn to moneylenders, who exploit the farmers. The money lenders charges high interest rates and the marginal farmers are poor and illiterate and these money lenders exploit them badly. Most times as collateral, farmers often sign away the title to their land. Even though several packages are allotted for farmers, they are not getting any benefits. Farms are confiscated due to inability to pay back high interest loans. The physical and mental harassment of the family by corrupt moneylenders contributed to farmers suicides.
- **Paradox of Elite corruption:** India is one of the top corrupted countries in world. According to Corruption Perception Index 2017 released by Transparency International, India ranked 81 out of 180 countries. One of the reasons for farmers to commit suicide is corruption and the middlemen who earn more profit than farmers. India is a country where 5 % of the elite class owned and controlled 80 % of the total wealth. We are living in a position where corporate giants and private business elites can borrow millions of rupees from our well organized banking system.

The so called well organized banks are showing more and more mercy towards these poor billionaire corporate classes. The banking system shows all their power, legal procedures, banking norms and rigidity towards poor and illiterate farmers. The paradox of corruption lies in the fact that the government and the formal agencies always at the service of elite groups. If our banking system and formal agencies stop supporting elite groups and help poor farmers, 90% of the farmers suicide in the country can be avoided.

Conclusion

The agricultural crisis is affecting a majority of the people in India. The poor farmers who produce food for the country are in deep strain and distress. The marginalized and vulnerable people like poor farmers who depend on agriculture, are getting unemployed and struggling for their subsistence. The crisis in agriculture sector is a crisis of the nation as a whole and it needs urgent attention. Poor awareness among the farmers regarding improved and scientific methods of cultivation and financial distress are the main reasons for crop failure and farmers suicides. This can be addressed through proper institutional credit facilities, crop insurances, trainings, exclusive packages for farmers and extension activities. There is a need to ensure that all farmers and their families have access to credit and entitlements as enshrined in policies and law. The state must ensure the well-being of farmers through the proper policy framework and indemnity be paid within a week after reporting of the crop failure. Crop insurance payment necessarily pushes the farmers from debt trap of the moneylender.

"Agriculture is our wisest pursuit, because it will in the end contribute most to real wealth, good morals, and happiness." Thomas Jefferson

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