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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### ASSESSMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH OF FARMER AND PREVENTION OF FARMER SUICIDE IN MEDIA

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Health (Mental and Physical) concerns are the leading causes of suicides in India.

Suicides among most demographics are declining over time and farmer suicides are declining the fastest. Suicide 'Contagion' can occur if suicides are overly dramatized or played up.

Research shows that responsible media coverage of suicides can play an important role in curbing suicide contagion.

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#### ABSTRACT

Financial stressors combined with family-farming relationships that blur the line between business and personal lives create unique sources of stress for farmers and farm families. If not addressed, these stressors can lead to physical illness, depression, substance abuse, and suicide. Farmers are more than five times more likely to commit suicide than the general population (McIntosh et al. 2016) and are more likely to report substance abuse (Bush and Lipari, 2015). Stress and depression also increase the already above average probability of accidents and injury (Fetsch, 2012), and stress may affect factors influencing other leading causes of death in rural areas, which include heart disease, chronic lower respiratory disease, and stroke (Moy et al., 2017). Farmers, farm families, and rural communities can help to manage farm-related stress and reduce incidences of Depression, substance abuse, and suicides

#### INTRODUCTION

The farmer suicide outbreak in India is alarming. But to attribute it to debt alone is too simplistic. Suicide is caused by many factors and there is empirical evidence to believe that this phenomenon could be a contagion in India, where farmers are committing copycat suicides. There have been a number of highly sensationalized suicide contagions in recent years across the world. Suicide contagions are typically very highly publicized suicide outbreaks. Another likely contagion in India could be the suicides of students around exam times. More recently, this has also led to shrill outcry from the media and much politicking. The government response to the crisis of farmer suicide has mostly been simplistic and in some cases perhaps aggravating. The main problem with offering 'special packages' to deal with such a problem is that it is reactionary rather than pre-emptive long term policy. Suicides are characterized by a prior history of difficulties and in most cases also mental illness that renders the person vulnerable to suicidal behavior. Suicide is caused by many factors even when it occurs in a cluster. Therefore it is crucial to avoid oversimplification of causes and sensationalizing the issue.

This requires responsible and sensitive reporting by the media, widespread efforts to screen and support mental health ailments by the public health systems in India and appropriate instruments of insurance.

**Farmers Suicide in India – What do the data say:** A report from the Uttar Pradesh state government concluded that 93 percent of all these suicides are due to debt. This is a simplistic conclusion. The role of indebtedness in suicides is not as straightforward as the policy makers believe. Let us do some inter-state analysis and start by comparing the two most farmer suicide prone states of Uttar Pradesh and Punjab with two of the most backward states of Punjab and Uttar Pradesh.

**Suicide Mortality Rates for farmers:** Uttar Pradesh and Allahabad have reported significantly higher number of suicides in each Category compared to UP and Allahabad. So from a public policy perspective, if we are to design appropriate interventions to check the incidence of suicides, Uttar Pradesh and AP should overall rank higher in targeting than UP and Allahabad. And these interventions should be for the larger population beyond the farming community in these states.

Most policy interventions have been limited to forgiving institutional debt, so we study the leading causes for suicides in these four states. In particular, we study percentage of suicides that are due to debt. This is a simplistic conclusion. The role of indebtedness in suicides is not as straight forward as the policy makers believe

**Farmer Suicide Contagion in India:** So health reforms at the state levels and particularly in rural areas is likely to have greater impact on distress and suicides than forgiving institutional loans.

**Percentage of suicides due to illness:** It would have been ideal to look at the exact factors that are driving farmers to commit suicides, but we can draw strong conclusions even from the aggregate numbers provided. So obviously there are other more important factors that should explain farmer suicides in this region; and the aggregate data strongly points towards poor health being the most important factor. There is an urgent need to address distress within the farming community (and overall rural areas) through major health reforms.

**Indebtedness in Rural India:** Dr. M. S. Swami Nathan in his recent article on farmers' suicide in The Hindu has called for ending the 'debt deaths'. Let us now look at some data on indebtedness in rural India. We will start out by looking at Incidence of Indebtedness (IOI) which is defined as percentage of households that are in debt from institutional and non-institutional lenders.

**Farmer Suicide Contagion in India:** So it is the poorer households that have higher debt burden. This is true for both institutional as well as non-institutional debt. However the suicide data reported by the Uttar Pradesh state government indicates that incidence of suicide is much higher for households with larger land holdings. Across many years, in several states, special packages have been designed by the state governments.

#### All India shares of suicides by profession

**Farmer Suicide Contagion in India:** Moving to the data on causes of suicides in India, we find that consistently over last two decades, 'Family problems' and 'illness' are the leading reported causes of suicides. These two factors can explain nearly half the total number of suicides in the country. Other reported reasons such as poverty, unemployment, lover affairs and bankruptcy are very insignificant reported causes of suicides. It is important to highlight here that despite an urgency from the local and national governments to counter suicide outbreaks through debt forgiveness and disbursal of credit, bankruptcy is a minor cause for such distress. Once again, the data strongly indicates that health is a major contributor to distress and suicides in India, across professional categories.

**Source:** Constructed from NCRB data

**Medical Research on Suicide:** Mood disorders and substance abuse are common. People, who become suicidal in response to recent events, generally have significant underlying mental problems, though they may be well hidden. The report on farmer Suicide from Maharashtra government claims that depression, illness, family disputes and addiction are common reported 'other' causes of suicide amongst farmers, besides

debt. Research indicates that during the period immediately after a death by suicide, grieving family Members or friends have difficulty understanding what happened. Responses may be extreme and underlying causes may be oversimplified. The main concern is that dramatizing the impact of suicide through descriptions and pictures of grieving relatives or community expressions may encourage potential victims. Suicide becomes an acceptable reaction to a situation.

**The Critical Role of Media in Avoiding/Spreading Suicide Contagion:** The American Association of Sociology defines suicide cluster (or contagion) as an occurrence in time and space of suicides, greater than the number of suicides which would be expected on the basis of statistical prediction. In this context, an ingredient which appears to facilitate a contagion is the tendency to glorify and sensationalize the deaths resulting in a highly charged emotional atmosphere that promotes further suicidal behavior. Across the world, suicide contagions have been reported by certain groups such as religious sects, troops in armed forces, prison inmates, college student and psychiatric inpatients. And a significant number of these appear to be associated with suicide stories in the mass media. Extensive research on suicides has shown that sensitive reporting of suicides by the media and Commentators can play a very important role in saving lives and preventing copycat suicides.

**Farmer Suicide Contagion in India Suicide:** It is also important to provide training to journalists who report suicides. The Centers for Disease Control in the US developed guidelines for the community response to a suicide cluster. The recommendations include (1) convening a coordinating committee from all concerned sectors of the community: education, public health, mental health, local government and suicide crisis centers; (2) delivering a public response that minimizes sensationalism and avoids glorifying the suicide victims; (3) evaluating and counseling community members who may be at risk.

#### Conclusion

Evolutionary-psychology literature argues that a sense of burdensomeness towards kin/family may encourage suicide by eroding the motive of self-preservation. In the Indian farmer's context, policy makers are arguing that this negative state is that of indebtedness. The main problem with offering 'special packages' to deal with such a problem is that it is reactionary rather than pre-emptive long term policy. Suicides are characterized by a prior history of difficulties and perhaps also mental illness that renders the person vulnerable to suicidal behavior. Suicide is caused by many factors even when it occurs in a cluster. Therefore it is crucial to avoid oversimplification of causes and sensationalizing the issue. And amongst population groups, the largest share of suicides in India is committed by housewives whose concerns can also be addressed through improved access to mental and physical healthcare. It is imperative for policy makers in India to take note and design interventions that can address distress amongst various population groups and not aggravate by misjudging and focusing on indebtedness alone.

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