

FARMERS SUICIDE IN INDIA: AN OVERVIEW

Prof. Siddharth N. Madare*

Abstract:

For last few years every other day we read the news of farmers committing suicides. The number of farmers who have committed suicides since 1997 has crossed 1 lakhs. In this context the actual problems being faced are to be understood and analysed. Innovative remedies have to be thought of which are to be implemented with sincerity by the Government and the implementing agencies, alongwith putting in place ways to rehabilitate the affected farmers. An attempt has been made in this article to address the issue of farmers plight leading to suicide and measures to address the issue have been suggested.

* Head the Department of Political Science, Sarvodaya Arts, Science and Commerce, Mahavidyalaya, Sindewahi, Distt. Chandrapur (M.S.)

Introduction

“Farmers’ suicides have to be viewed as a national disaster”, the statement of the Prime Minister of India, himself a distinguished economist opens our eyes to the agrarian crisis that haunts the country today. Tens of thousands of farmers in different states of India have committed suicide. These suicides can no more be considered isolated cases of farmer’s deaths but a symbol of deepening crisis of Indian agriculture. There is a debate regarding causes and number of deaths of farmers in the country. In the initial period of late 1990’s when there were sporadic incidents of suicides across the country there was general indifference and apathy towards these incidents. But, when in early 2000 and onwards the number of farmers’ deaths started rising fast in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra and Punjab, the Governments started feeling the pinch of growing public wrath. While some Governments took immediate relief measures, some appointed commissions to probe into the truth of the matter.

Thinkers Views on Farmers Suicides

- Stating about farmers indebtedness Vandana Shiva (2009) points out that in 1998, the World Bank’s structural adjustment policies forced India to open up its seed sector to global corporation. Farm saved seeds were replaced by corporate seeds. The poor peasants have to buy new seeds for every planting season and what was a traditionally a free resource, available by putting aside a small portion of the crop, becomes a commodity. This new expense increases poverty and leads to indebtedness.
- Mentioning the cause of farmers suicide Vaidyanathan, A (2006) says that “farmers suicides are associated with high level of indebtedness is popularly and even in some academic writings, seen as indicative of the Indian peasantry in general suffering from unbearable burden of debt and teetering on the brink of bankruptcy”
- Aruna Burte, Sangeeta Rege and Padma Deosthali (2008) opine that the farmers are unable to cope up with the sudden changes in cropping patterns, market fluctuations, and use of pesticides to increase the yield. These are direct results of agricultural policy driven by market forces. When the crops fail, they are in debt, which they have no means to repay. They are unable to

perform the role of provider for the family. All these factors are to be taken in to consideration while understanding an individual farmer committing suicide.

- Emphasizing the importance of joint family Deshpande (2002:2601-2610) asserts that in joint family each member was secure. The joint families in olden days were extending moral support to its members at the time of all crises. The majority of victims who committed suicides were surprisingly came from nuclear families. Even Durkheim in his monumental contribution 'La Suicide' speaks of the corelationship that exists between family size and incidence of suicides. According to him there exists an 'inverse relationship between family size and tendency towards suicides'.
- Banakar and Suryaprakash (1987) studied the supply and utilisation of crop production credit in Karnataka and concluded that the small and medium farmers received a lower proportion of total loans compared to their numerical strength in the total number of borrowers, while the large farmers received a fairly larger share.
- Singh and Sharma (1990) while studying the agricultural finance and management opined that the cost of loan was one of the important basic characteristics of a good loan and should be at a reasonable cost which involves not only interest rates but also fees for documents and services associated with grant of loan.
- Pochepparadjou (1992) found that the cost of credit was more in the case of moneylender than the commercial banks because of exorbitant rate of interest charged by him. Farmers were happier with the commercial bank credit even though the non-interest cost was more.
- Singh and Tyagi (1995) concluded that the cooperatives, by providing adequate and timely credit could create a favourable impact on agricultural development even in a backward region. This study was conducted in Vikramjot block of Basti district of Uttar Pradesh.

Contributing Factors for Farmers Suicides

Apart from the views of the thinkers, mentioned above the following factors contribute to the suicides among farmers.

- Failure of Crops – Failure of crops due to the failure of rainfall, drought, destruction of crops due to pests and use of low quality seeds.
- Increasing prices – The prices of inputs such as seeds, fertilizers and pesticides have gone up and prices of crops have been pushed down to the extent even below the cost of production.
- Financial stress – The farming community experiences the financial stress due to price crash of agricultural products and as a result there is increase in the debt burden.
- Unwilling to adopt scientific practices in farming also make the farmers face the problems.
- Untreated mental illness – Lack of access to mental health services in rural areas and the stigma attached to treatment.
- Depression arising from exposure to agricultural chemicals/pesticides may increase the risk for mood disorders and ultimately suicide.
- Scarcity of water – due to failure of rainfall, failure of bore wells, sharp decrease in ground water table.
- Improper supply of electricity by different electrical companies' indifferent regions of the state results in the inability of the farmers to supply water to the fields.
- Failure of the governmental institutions to meet out the needs and aspirations of the farming community.

Street farmer suicide in India

Depicts year wise number of suicides by farmers in India the period from 1997 to 2006 for nine years. Of the nine years the number farmers' suicide is higher or three years 2002, 2004 and 2005. In 2002 the number of suicides 15308 farmers committed suicides, in 2004 the total number of suicides by farmers were 15929 and in 2005,14973 farmers have committed suicide. The India was reeling under severe drought during these three years.

According National Institute of Mental Health, United States of America, (www.nimh.nih.gov) “suicidal tendencies are caused by emotional disorders, chemical imbalances and genetic traits. Major psychiatric illness, including bipolar disorder, depression, schizophrenia and substance

abuse, which increase the risk of suicide, are inherited” (Guruswami M et al, 2008). These neurobiological factors predispose one to suicide. Srijit Mishra (2006) opines that an adverse economic condition acts as the trigger for the act of suicide. He further points out that suicide is an interaction between neurobiological factors and socio-economic factors.

Another worth noting fact in the context of farmer suicides according to National Institute of Mental Health, USA is the relevance of ‘suicide contagion’. Suicide contagion is the exposure to suicide or suicidal behaviors within one’s family, one’s peer group, or through media reports of suicide and result in an increase in suicide and suicidal behaviour. This kind of mass mentality attitude is undeniable. Sharad Joshi (2004) leader of the Farmers Movement in Maharashtra states that “the farmers are driven to suicide, first in trickles and then in waves, as suicide became a thinkable proposition”.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) report on ‘Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India 2007’, 46 farmers commit suicide every day in India. In all as many as 16,632 farmers, including 2,369 women killed themselves in 2007 constituting 14.4 percent of the total number of suicides in the country. There is a slight drop in the number of farmers’ suicide in 2007 as compared to 2006. The total number of farm suicides in 2006 was 17,060 and it is 16,632 in 2007. Further NCRB report on ‘Accidental Deaths and Suicides India 2008’ points out that 1,99,132 farmers have committed suicide since 1997 to 2008.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

There is a need to thinkers views on farmers suicides in the India to arrive at accurate estimates of economic stress related suicides among the farmer and agricultural labourers. This task cannot be performed by in individual or a research institution on its own. This would require support and sponsorship of the Indian government . The government can appoint an expert group to make estimates and analyze causes and suggest remedial measures to prevent this unfortunate phenomenon.

At the same time immediate steps are required for rehabilitation to families of poor peasants and agricultural labourers who have lost their earning members and are facing a destitute situation. This would require immediate compensations to the family (Rs.2.00 lakh) as support to

the family, on the pattern of Andhra Pradesh. In a case where to earning member is left in the family, window/old age pension scheme can be extended to such families.

As was observed in the study there was not much difference in the cropping patterns of the suicide and control cases. But, the cropping pattern itself was not much diversified. This already suggested needs the attention of the Agricultural Universities, and the agricultural as extension agencies.

Heavy indebtedness is identified as the prime cause for the spate of farmer's suicides. Agricultural credit as is traditionally called oil for the wheels of agriculture, is not a problem in itself. But, the growing indebtedness beyond the material capacity of the farmers threatens his survival. Survival is threatened because of two factors namely the psychological factor of being insulted in the society and secondly and more importantly of being dispossessed of his only means of survival *i.e.* land. Farmer has to be rescued from this situation. Therefore, agricultural credit system should be tuned to protect the farmer. With all said and done agricultural sector is still a vulnerable sector to be left to the mercy of private moneylenders. Therefore,

- i. An All India level enquiry into the problem of indebtedness and overdue, on the lines of All India Rural Credit Surveys of 1960's should be appointed by the Central Government.
- ii. Private money lending needs to be regulated with respect to the rate of interest as well as repayment schedule.
- iii. Cooperatives are still the best means of meeting the agrarian credit needs, which should be strengthened against the challenges of private as well as global finance.
- iv. The earlier mechanism of the Scheduled Commercial Banks to effectively monitor and evaluate credit use by the trained farm graduates should be restored. Therefore, more and more technical experts like agricultural graduates should be recruited for this job. In absence of this, cheap institutional money is siphoned off for private money lending which, is a dangerous development in the rural areas.

References

- Bankar,B. and Suryaprakash,1987, Borrowing and utilization pattern of crop production credit in Karnataka : A case study. *Prajnan*, 16(1): 77-83.
- Deshpande,R.S., Amalendu, and Narayan Murthy, A., 2001, Indebtedness among agricultural labourers from deprived castes – towards an explanation. *Arthavijana*, 43(1-2): 159-172.
- Nagathan;S.D.2006, Economic Perspective of farmers suicides A symbol of Agrarian crisis in Karnataka, Thesis submitted to the University of Agricultural Science, Dharwad.
- Pouchepparadjou, A., 1992, An analysis of Commercial Banks financing to agriculture in the union territory of Pondicherry. *M.Sc.(Agri.) Thesis*, University of Agricultural Sciences, Bangalore.
- Singh and Sharma,1990, *Agricultural Finance and Management*, Friends Publications, Meerut.
- Singh,A,K. and Tyagi.V.P.1995, Comparative finance and agricultural development. *Indian Cooperative Review*, 33(2): 138-142.
- Vidyasagar, R., 1996, *New Agrarianism and the Challenges for the Left*, (Edited Book), Class formation and Political Transformation in post colonial India, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- Sainath, P. (2009): “The Largest Wave of Suicides in History Centriccontinental-cetri”, [http://www.centri.be/spip.php? article 1057](http://www.centri.be/spip.php?article%201057). Pp 1-3.
- Vandana, S. (2009): “Why Are Indian Farmers Committing Suicide and How Can We Stop This Tragedy?” mhtml:file//H.
- Burte, A., Rege, S. and Deosthali, P. (2008): “Choosing to Live – Guidelines for Suicide Prevention Counseling In Domestic Violence”, CEHAT Publications, Mumbai.
- Wikipedia-Free Encyclopedia