

FARMERS SUICIDE IN INDIA

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FARMER SUICIDE

As per statistics by Government of India, over 12,000 suicides were reported in the agricultural sector every year since 2013. The report states that “a total of 12,602 persons involved in farming sector - 8,007 farmers-cultivators and 4,595 agricultural labourers - committed suicide during 2015, accounting for 9.4% of total suicide victims (133,623) in the country.” Maharashtra topped the list with 4,291 suicides, followed by Karnataka, Telangana, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu with 1,569, 1,400,

1,290, 954, 916 and 606, respectively. Together, these seven states accounted for 87.5% of total suicides in the farming sector in the country i.e., 11,026 of 12,602. In 2014, 12,360 persons in the farming sector i.e., 5,650 farmers and 6,710 agricultural labourers committed suicide, accounting for 9.4% of the total number of suicides (131,666) in the country. In 2013, the number was 11,772, accounting for 8.7% of the 134,799 suicides in the country

The ultimate sign of distress is suicide. Amid the ongoing rural distress, reports of farmer suicides are often used to highlight the plight of rural India. However, new data and research suggest that farmer suicides may not have increased in recent years and may have more complex causes than falling incomes or rising indebtedness.

According to the 2018 National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, the rate of farmer suicides in India has decreased over the last few years. This decrease comes even as overall suicide rates remained fairly constant and rural poverty shot up. In 2018, there were 10.2 suicides for 100,000 Indians, largely in line with the World Health Organization's estimates of global suicide rates, but 3.6 suicides for 100,000 farmers and farm labourers.

FARMERS SUICIDE IN INDIA: REASONS

Scholars have given various reasons such as monsoon failure, climate change, high debt burdens, government policies, mental health, personal issues and family problems among the reasons of in India. Some of these reasons are explained as under:

1.The surge in input costs: A major cause of the farmer's suicides in India has been the increasing burden on the farmers due to inflated prices of

agricultural inputs. The culmination of these factors is seen in the overall increase in the cost of cultivation, for wheat, the cost at present is three times than it was in 2005. The input costs consists of following costs:

- Cost of chemicals and seeds
- Costs of Agricultural equipment

2.Labour costs: Likewise, hiring labourers and animals is getting costlier too. While this may reflect an improvement in the socio-economic status of the labourers, driven primarily by MGNREGA and hike in minimum basic income, this has not gone too well with boosting the agriculture sector.

3.Distressed due to loans:

•NCRB data points out that in 2474 suicides out of the studied 3000 farmer suicides in 2015 the victims had unpaid loans from local banks. This is clear enough an indication for drawing correlations between the two. Moreover, a shift away from usual trend also revealed that of the loans taken by these farmers, only 9.8% were loans from money-lenders. Thus the pressure or muscle-power of money-lenders could be far from being a major driving force, as is otherwise perceived. Another source of strong linkages between farmer suicides and indebtedness is reflected from the spread of the two. While Maharashtra had 1293 suicides for indebtedness,

Karnataka had 946. Note that both these states saw one of the highest incidences of farmer suicides as well as indebtedness.

4.Lack of direct integration with the market: Although initiatives like the National Agricultural Market and contract farming are helping integrate the farmers' produce directly with the market, cutting the role of intermediaries, the reality is still lagging behind.

5.Lack of awareness: The digital divide, as well as the literacy gap, has made the marginal and small farmers particularly vulnerable due to their inability to utilise the positives of government policies.

6.Water crisis: The concentration of these suicides in the water-deficit regions of states like Maharashtra, Karnataka is a manifestation of how the water crisis and thereby failure to meet production demands have intensified the menace. This is particularly true in the backdrop of continued failed monsoons.

•Interstate water disputes: What has added to the already prevalent crisis is the unwillingness to cater to each other's water needs amongst the states. A case in point is the recently resurfaced Kaveri dispute that saw Karnataka and Tamil Nadu battle out water shortage both in and outside the tribunal even to the extent of non-compliance with the tribunal award.

7.Climate change has acted as the last nail in the coffin by resulting in furthering of the uncertainties associated with the already uncertain monsoon system and hence agricultural production. While incidents like flash floods have led to crop losses, deferred monsoons have seen production shortfall year-in and year-out

8.India's urban consumer driven economic policies: The political economy of India is driven more by the urban consumers than the rural producers. This is reflected in the urgency to impose



price controls in case of price rise (imposing Minimum Export Prices, bringing items under Essential Commodities etc) and a lacklustre withdrawal once the price is under control. Contrast this with how we have been imposing minimum import price to secure our steel sector. This differential treatment to primary sector also limits profit margin and thereby hinders farmers' chances of breaking free from the cycle of indebtedness.

9.Loan waivers instead of restructuring, re-investment measures: Our approach of handling

farmer indebtedness and hence farmer suicides has been appeasement politics like the recent move by the UP government to waive off Rs 36000 crore worth of loans. Surprisingly this comes at a time when agricultural yield is expected to be better in the wake of a good monsoon.

In essence, the factors sum up to crop failure, unsustainable production and subsequent farmer indebtedness leading to failure of strengthening the economic state of the farmer as the driving force behind these suicides.

FARMERS SUICIDE IN INDIA: STATISTICS

National figures though mask the significant variation in farmer suicide rates across states. Karnataka, Maharashtra and Kerala reported the highest suicide rates in 2018, as per NCRB data. A 2014 study of farmer suicides between 1997-2012 had placed these three states among those with a major problem regarding farmer suicides. The study also classified a group of states that have had little problem with farmer suicides historically. This group included Punjab but that seems to have changed in recent years. Among the major agrarian states, Punjab has experienced a sharp jump in farmer suicides with more than a five-fold increase. Some states seem to barely have a farmer suicide issue, the NCRB data suggests. In 2018, six states, including Bihar, Odisha and West Bengal reported zero farmer suicides. However, for states such as Odisha and West Bengal the claim of zero suicides seems implausible. In Odisha, ground reports of farmer suicides, including data presented in the assembly, do not match NCRB data.

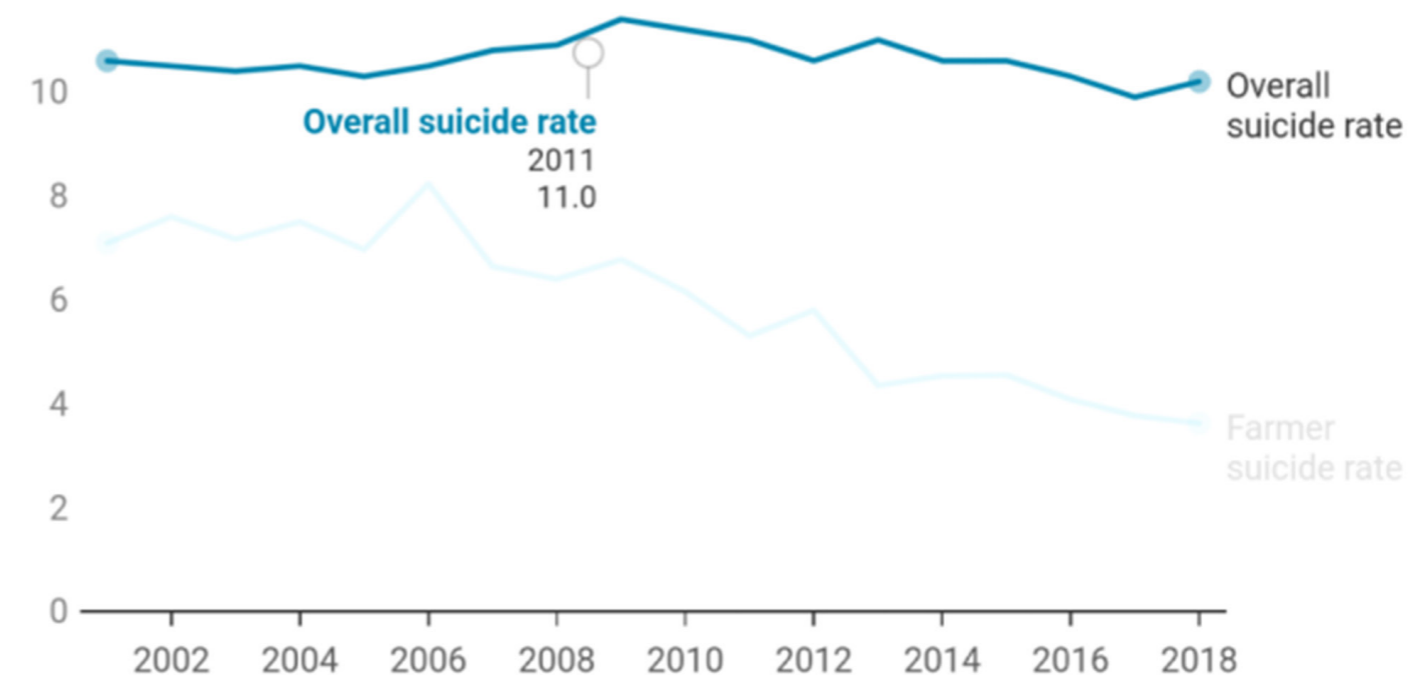
A better way to understand farmer suicide data is to compare it with the overall suicide rate in the states. In some states, such as Karnataka and Maharashtra, both general suicides and farmer suicides seem to be more common. Conversely, other states, such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, have tended to report both lower overall suicide rates and farmer suicide rates in recent years. But there is a significant gap between overall suicide rates and farmer suicide rates in a few states. For instance, West Bengal reported a high overall suicide rate and has a history of farmer suicides, but reported zero farmer suicides in 2018. Punjab and Mizoram are the only states where the farmer suicide rate actually exceeded the overall suicide rate.

In 2014, around 9.4% of all national suicides were classified as farmer suicides. By 2018, this figure had fallen to 7.7%. One group that has seen a sharp rise in suicides is daily wage earners. In 2014, daily wage earner suicides accounted for just 12% of all of India's suicides, but by 2018 this had risen to 22%. This was the biggest increase among all the professions tracked by NCRB.



Farmer suicide rates have decreased steadily over the last decade

Suicide rate (suicides per 100,000 population*)



Share of total suicides across India

