

Increasing Self-Immolation By Farmers In India: Statistics, Reasons and Solutions

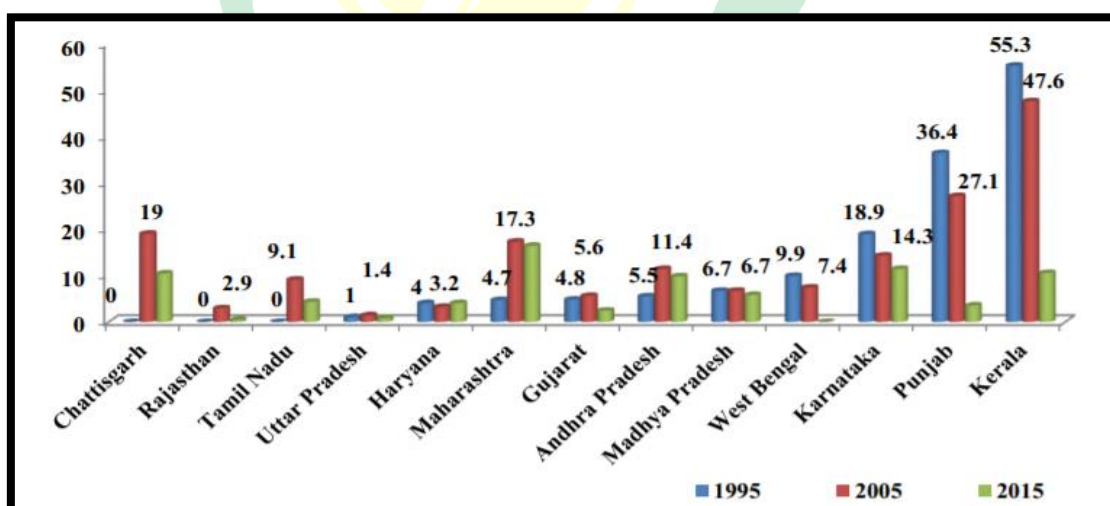
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The ultimate sign of distress is suicide. Amid the ongoing rural distress, reports of farmer’s suicides are often used to highlight the plight of rural India. However, new data and research suggest that farmer suicides may not have increased in recent years and may have more complex causes than falling incomes or rising indebtedness. As many as 42,480 farmers and daily wagers committed suicide in 2019, an increase of about 6 per cent from 2018, as the number of farmers committing suicide fell marginally while that of daily wagers increased 8 per cent. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data on accidental deaths and suicides, 10,281 farmers committed suicide in 2019, down from 10,357 in 2018, whereas the figure for daily wagers went up to 32,559 from 30,132.



Decadal variations in farmer suicide rates across major states: macro point of view Source Computed from NCRB and Census data for various years. 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 with 1,569, Telangana 1,400, Madhya Pradesh 1,290, Chhattisgarh 954, Andhra Pradesh 916 and Tamil Nadu 606. Together, these seven states accounted for 87.5% of total suicides in the farming sector in the country - 11,026 of 12,602. In 2014, 12,360 persons in the farming sector - 5,650 farmers-cultivators 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 number of suicides by farm labourers, defined as those whose primary source of income is through farm (agriculture / horticulture) labour activities, has gone down to 4,324 in 2019, from 4,586 a year before. The numbers highlight another worrying trend. In 17 states, more farm labourers have committed suicides than farmers, while the reverse is true for seven states. Yet, only 58 per cent of the total suicides committed by people employed in the sector are farmers. West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, Uttarakhand, Manipur, Chandigarh, Daman & Diu, Delhi, Lakshadweep and Puducherry reported zero suicides of farmers and agricultural labourers. The report suggests that with over 139,123 registered suicides, India recorded the highest suicide numbers in the past five years. The 2019 suicide numbers was 3.4 per cent higher than 2018. In other words, 10.4 people committed suicides per 1,00,000 population. In recent times, agriculture made headlines for all the wrong reasons: Farmers quitting cultivation; the sector turning into a perennial loss-making enterprise; and the country's official policy to downsize the dependence on agriculture to reduce overall economic hardship among the poorest of the population. Agriculture's fast-declining economic

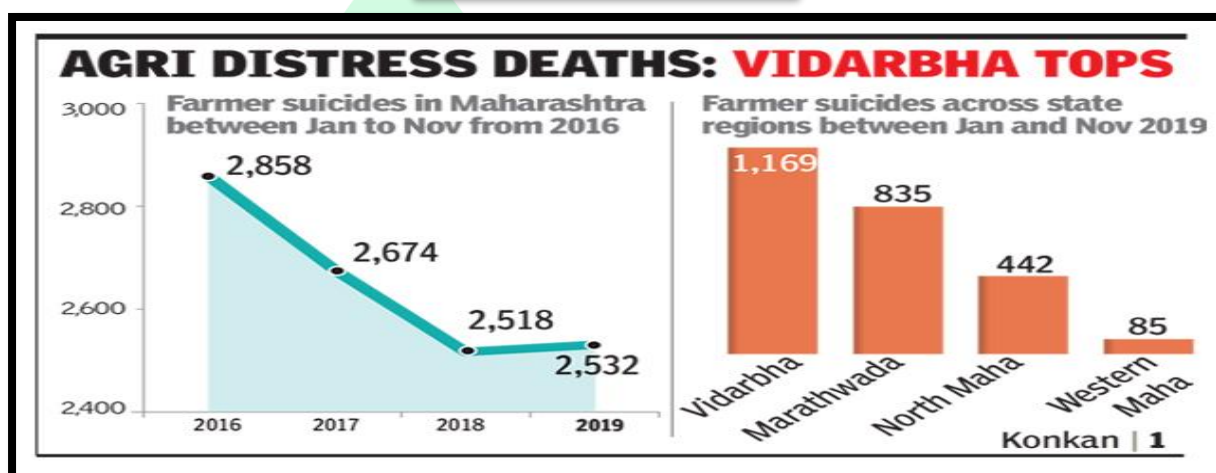
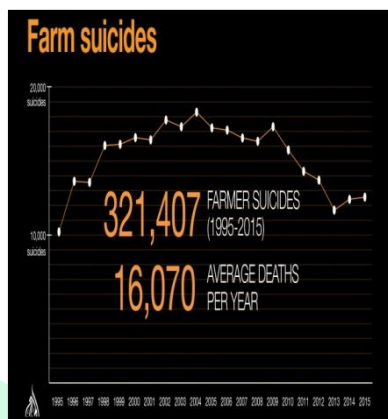
importance reached such an extent that economists suggested India had already turned into a non-agrarian economy and the more people quit farming, the better the fortune of remaining farmers would be. But two developments in the first half of September seem to be forcing us to revise these perceptions of Indian farming and farmers.



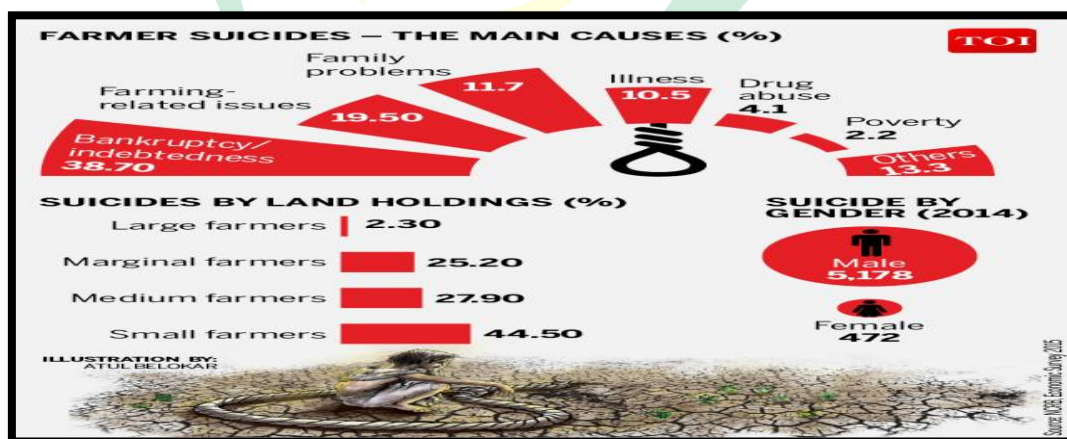
First, when India recorded 23.9 per cent contraction in the gross domestic product (GDP) in the first quarter (April-June, 2020), agriculture emerged as the unbelievable winner, growing at 3.4 per cent. This growth in the agriculture sector was based on the rabi or winter crop, that was anyway a bumper one. Second, the kharif or the monsoon crop is already an exceptional one in terms of acreage. It has broken a four-year record, with 109.5 million hectares (ha) under sowing. Farmers are not earning proportionately to their production or matching agricultural growth. As such, a farmer's share in consumers' expenditure on food items is very low; sometimes, it is less than 66 per cent and as low as 20 per cent in case of fruits and vegetables. Official data does point at an increase in the income from farming per cultivator in recent years.

But that is due to another reason. The growth in farm income/ cultivator during 2004-05 to 2011-12 increased not due to a rise in real income but due to steep decline in the number of cultivators to 146 million in 2011-12, from 167 million in 2004-05. A potential loss in the kharif season is an ominous sign for farmers. They make the most from the kharif season, in comparison to the rabi. In the central and northern hilly areas of the country, farmers don't earn anything in the rabi season and depend entirely on the kharif seasons for survival.

Statistics regarding farmer's suicide:



Why do farmer actually commit suicide



Solution for Self-immolation by farmers:

Farmers need to be protected from falling into the trap of the spiraling debt, which is the primary risk factor for suicide. Small and marginal farmers should be encouraged to pool their farmland. Water supply for irrigation must be insulated from the vagaries of nature by

better water management systems; attention must particularly be paid to rainwater harvesting and resolution of interstate river water sharing disputes. Farmers must necessarily be educated about modern farming techniques and practices. Younger professionals must be encouraged to participate in farming activities. Farm loans at soft interest rates need to be made available, and loan recovery procedures should be provided. Reasonable price for farm products must be ensured, and middlemen eliminated by creating a direct reach for the farmers to the market. The government-administered MSP should be taken into consideration the existing realities to cover the cost of production and to insulate farmers from fluctuating market conditions. Training needs to be provided for secondary rural investments other than agricultural practises like in dairy farming, poultry farming, animal husbandry, and other activities, with a clearly viable chain apparent from financing to marketing. The matters ranging from alcohol use to dowry gifts and large wedding spending should be discouraged. Storage and food processing units need to be established in rural areas. Comprehensive but affordable insurance schemes should be made available, covering farmers and crops from problems at every stage of the crop cycle. There should be a quick, simple, and corruption-free approach to crop damage assessment with disbursement of relief directly into the claimant's bank account. Pradhan Mantri Farmer Bima Yojana, an improved version of existing schemes such as the National Agricultural Insurance Scheme and the Modified National Agricultural Insurance Scheme (NAIS), is a step in the right direction although some voices have been raised against it. Organizations such as the Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture call it another missed opportunity, citing drawbacks such as non inclusion of tenant farmers, limited coverage, non inclusion of crop damage by wild animals, improper damage assessment methods, and lack of clarity regarding where the claim amount will be deposited (to the farmers' savings account or to the loan account).

Attention should be focused on the development of an all-encompassing relief scheme after consulting farmers and farmer movements, and after considering the recommendations of government committees such as the PK Mishra Committee and others.