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RESEARCH ARTICLE

'FARMERS' SUICIDE IN MARATHWADA, INDIA: REASONS AND REMEDIES

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ABSTRACT

Farmers' suicides in India have led to public policy and academic discourse. Relatively higher suicide rates for farmers are to be identified as a symptom of a larger socio-economic malaise. Various reasons are attributed for the suicides namely, poor productivity, fluctuation in rainfall and climate, huge investment and low income, indebtedness, socio-economic impact. This review focuses on the reasons and suggests some remedies to resolve the issue of suicides by farmers.

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INTRODUCTION

The Global Burden of Disease (GBD) estimates that from 1990 to 2010 the years of life lost (YLL) due to suicides increased by 127% in India and the rank of suicides in causes of YLL moved up from twentieth to eighth (IHME, 2010). Farmers' suicides in India have led to public policy and academic discourse (Vasavi, 2012). There have been some recent attempts at evaluating suicide incidences, and estimating suicide rates for farmers by normalizing it with farm population, or operational holdings (Plewis, 2014). Suicide is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon (Leenaars, 1995). More than 90% of suicides are likely to be associated with neurobiological disorders, but these are predisposing in nature (Mann, 2002) The relatively higher incidence of suicides among a particular sub-group of population, 100 years after Durkheim, are to be identified with socio-economic risk factors that are precipitating in nature (Mishra et al., 2011). This, however, does not imply the absence of socio-economic ills when suicide incidences are lower or absent. Agriculture and agriculture allied sectors in India contribute nearly 22% of Gross Domestic Production (GDP). A vast majority of people nearly 65 to 70% depend on agriculture (Khairnar, 2015).

The share of the agriculture in India's GDP has come down from 50% to 20% in the last four decades. The 10th five year plan allocated less than 2% to agriculture. The recent status of agriculture crises revealed that Maharashtra state that to particularly Marathwada region has recorded highest numbers of farmers suicide in 2014. In 1983 Dandekar Committee was constituted by Government of Maharashtra to study the economic condition of the districts in the state. It evaluated as Marathwada region has the poorest districts (Khairnar, 2011, 2015)

In 1992, P. C. Sarkar committee again reported the same. E. A. Sharma committee of central Government also listed eight districts of Marathwada region as the most down trodden districts. Marathwada region was mentioned as the high risk districts in agriculture sector by R. Radhakrishna committee in 2007. In recent, Kelkar committee clearly mentioned that Marathwada region has consistently witnessed decreasing per capita income. However the committee has not emphasized concrete suggestions for the poverty reduction and development measures for Marathwada region (Project report by Manavlok's College of Social Sciences, Ambajogai). Relatively higher suicide rates for farmers are to be identified as a symptom of a larger socio-economic malaise – the crisis in Indian agriculture that also has a human rights dimension (Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, 2011). Perhaps

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more than India's success in rural poverty reduction, suicides by farmers in India's rural areas have received an immense global and domestic media attention over the last ten years (Anderson *et al.*, 2014). Increasing agrarian distress in the form of economic liberalization, shift from subsistence to cash crops, and depleted environmental resources has been held responsible for this phenomenon and also been a central issue in recent national election campaigns in India (Angrist *et al.*, 2009). "On average, one farmer commits suicide every 30 minutes in India," (Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, 2011). India experienced its first wave of farmer suicides in 1997, at which time the number of farmer suicides per year was around 14,000. This number increased in 2005 to 17,000 per year (Sainath, 2007). What causes farmer suicide in India? What factors contribute to the fluctuation in number and frequency of suicides (increases/decreases); and to what extent have farmer suicides been affected by globalization (participation in the world market, privatization and liberalization)? What is the best type of policy to pursue in order to address this problem and to positively impact a farmer's life? All these aspects are covered in this article.

Farmers and suicide

The vast majority of poor in India is living in rural areas and engaged primarily in subsistence agriculture for survival, even today. The core problems of widespread poverty, growing inequality, rapid population growth and rising unemployment find their origin in the stagnation and often retrogression of economic life in rural areas. The economic progress, whatever, that has been allowed in India before and after independence, has bypassed millions of people (Rudrappan, 2003). If development is to take place and become self sustaining, really and substantially encompassing especially the poor, it will have to start in the rural areas in general and agriculture in particular (Singh, 2003).

The emphasis of rural credit has been on providing timely and adequate credit support to the farmers with particular focus on small and marginal farmers and weaker sections of the society to enable them to adopt modern technology and improved agricultural practices for agricultural production and productivity. Agricultural credit is disbursed through multi-agency network consisting of commercial banks, regional rural banks and cooperatives. Of these, cooperatives have emerged as the prime institutional agency for the dispensation of rural credit, accounting for a share of 41 per cent in rural credit flow for agriculture. Availing institutional finance easily is no less than a dream come true to the Indian farmers (Rawat, 2003). The farmers' suicides across the states are blamed on their indebtedness. The situation therefore demands that the government should reorient its policy as regards to rural credit (Rawat, 2003). Trapped in a cycle of debt, most of the small farmers use up their income to pay the loan. An obvious and accepted problem faced by Indian farmers is that they often do not get a fair price for their produce.

Following are some of the reasons for the increasing suicides among farmers:

- Failure of institutional credits for small and marginal farmers.

- Withdrawal of government intervention from safety nets such as fair price shops (FPS), and the exclusion of poor and indebted from the food distribution system.
- Increasing cost of agriculture inputs like seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, etc.
- Reduced price of agriculture produces.
- Increasing dependence of small farmers on moneylenders, at rates of interest from 24 to 60 per cent per annum, sometimes even more.
- Cumulative crop loss.

Remedy that can be offered

We need to develop a comprehensive policy taking into account all the related aspects – agrarian reforms, rural credit system, agricultural insurance, crop changes, employment opportunities etc. Following are some suggestions and recommendations to alleviate the present situation.

- To sustain the family of the deceased, all the financial help should be provided as 'Fixed Deposit' in the bank, with quarterly payment of interest.
- A comprehensive Agricultural Insurance Scheme should be launched. Specific attention should be given to cover cash crops – like cotton, sugarcane and edible oils.
- Organic farming should be promoted to avoid or minimize the cost of pesticides and fertilizers.
- Biodiversity must be the basis of production to reduce vulnerability to climate and markets.
- Strongest action under Indian Penal Code should be taken against suppliers and manufactures of spurious pesticides.
- Likewise, the suppliers of spurious/inferior seeds must be punished.
- Integrated Pest Management (IPM) should be popularized among farmers.
- Institutionalized Credit System to the farmers must be simplified.
- Moneylenders charging the exorbitant rate of interest must be punished.
- Gram Panchayats should evolve a mechanism to identify the indebted and suicide prone farmers and help them to overcome the crisis.
- Extension agencies with a vision of eco-friendly sustainable development should guide the farmers to make the efficient use of water, electricity, pesticide and other inputs.
- The role of commission agents, traders and intermediaries should be minimized to facilitate the farmers to fetch maximum price of their produce.
- Agriculture policy needs to shift from its current bias of 'corporate first' to 'farmers first'.

Concluding Remarks

Risk management in agriculture should address yield, price, credit, income or weather related uncertainties among others. Improving water availability will facilitate diversification of cropping pattern, but this should go hand in hand with policies that increase non-farm employment. Availability of affordable credit requires revitalization of the rural credit market.

A challenge for all is to provide innovative products that reduce costs while increasing returns. Besides, public institutions, there is need for a greater involvement from the civil society.

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