



The silent struggles: Unveiling the psychology behind the alarming rise of farmer suicides in India

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Abstract

The alarming rise in farmer suicides in India has become a grave concern for the nation. Over the past decade, the agricultural sector has witnessed approximately 10,000 Indian farmers succumbing to suicide annually. This article draws upon data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) to provide insights into the multifaceted nature of this crisis. The study reveals that the alarming rise in farmer suicides can be attributed to a complex interplay of socio-economic challenges, climate change, and psychological distress. Socio-economic factors, such as small landholdings, rising input costs, and lack of market integration, create financial burdens and debt traps for farmers, pushing them to the brink of desperation. Climate change-induced crop failures further exacerbate their distress and hopelessness. Importantly, the article sheds light on the often-overlooked psychological aspects of farmer suicides. Social isolation, uncertainty, financial stress, and the stigma surrounding mental health in rural communities significantly contribute to the escalating suicide rates among farmers. The reluctance to seek help and the lack of accessible mental health services aggravate their vulnerability. Furthermore, the study explores the impact of farmer suicides on women farmers, who face additional challenges due to traditional gender roles and limited access to resources. The burden of managing household responsibilities alongside farming duties puts them at a higher risk of suicide. Ultimately, this article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the silent struggles faced by farmers and pave the way for effective interventions to combat this critical public health issue.

Keywords: Suicide, Climate change, Psychological, NCRB

Introduction

India has seen an increasing trend in the suicide committed by farmers in the recent years. Since 2013, it has been observed that every year, almost 10,000 Indian farmers have succumbed their lives to suicides. According to the data released by National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), in 2017, 10,655 suicides were reported in farming sector which went rising even more, totaling to 10,881 in 2021. These suicides comprise farmers/cultivators as well as agricultural laborers. Further analysis of the relevant data from NCRB confirms that the number of suicides by farmers/cultivators declined from 5,955 in 2017 to 5,318 in 2021. However, during the corresponding period, number of suicides among agricultural laborers increased from 4,700 to 5,563. In 2021, the total suicides in India amounted to 1,64,033 of which 6.61 percent was from the agrarian community. The condition is graver in states like Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra being the epicenter of such suicides. All these states shared 80 percent of the total suicides in farmer sector in 2021.

Maharashtra alone saw 3228 agrarian suicides in 2015. In 2021, this number was 4,064 of which, specifically farmer suicides amounted to 2743 rising to 2942 in 2022. In Maharashtra, farmers' suicide rate is 60% higher than the general suicide rate. Every 5th farmer's suicide committed in the country comes from Maharashtra (Behere *et al.*, 2021) ^[2]. What is the apple of discord of such a huge problem? It is important to ascertain where we are lagging. Despite so many efforts by the governments, the number of suicides has gone nowhere but increased. It must be emphasized that suicides are multifaceted and cannot be regarded only as an individual action but as affected by wider social or cultural circumstances (Staples, 2012) ^[10]. As a result, suicide is of public concern and recognized as a public health priority (Staples and Widger, 2012; WHO, 2014) ^[10]. According to Behere and Bhise (2009) ^[1], India, Sri Lanka, the United States of America, Canada, United Kingdom and Australia, farming has been identified as one of the most dangerous nations as far as suicides are concerned. The concept of suicide deals with various aspects *viz.* psychological, socio-economical, cultural and the like. So, it is important that to tackle this problem, all the spheres shall be undertaken carefully and understood in broad manner so that effective solutions can be worked out. The article also focuses on the suicides committed by women farmers and what are the impact of farmer suicides on women. A report by the news agency Aljazeera said that between 2018 and 2019, 22 women farmers ended their lives in Maharashtra. These suicides expose the precarious state in which the country's struggling farmers and impoverished agricultural laborers currently find themselves. Farming women in this position often become stressed and fatigued due to multiple tasks and the conflict between their traditional role as a housemaker and the need for off-farm income. The female farmers have an additional burden of performing household chores apart from farming. This makes farm women a high-risk category for suicide. England, Australia and now India had reported suicide among this gender.

21st century has come up with a lot of advancements in farming sectors including the use of precision farming, remote sensing, agri-bots, modern audio-visual aids *etc.* But we have to gasp these advancements with a pinch of salt as we have started to face a lot of challenges alongside these advancements. Climate change is a big hurdle for us at present which leads to crop failure at a much greater level posing a danger to farmers and putting them at the risk of ending their lives. The factors associated with farmers suicides are many. These factors find their origin in both psychological and socio-economic contexts. Most of the past studies have mainly focused on the socio-economic causes but have overlooked on the psychology behind the phenomenon. One school of thought has suggested the primacy of an impaired mental health state, implying that the psychosocial needs of farmers have been neglected, and that caring community professionals need to address farmer distress (Srinivasa, 2012) ^[9]. Although some studies state that the role of socio-economic factors is more important than the psychological ones (Hedge, 1980; Xavier *et al.*, 2007) ^[14]. Rao *et al.* (2017) ^[8] while comparing both the factors reported that there is a paucity of research on psychological autopsy of farmers' suicides as well as the lack of consideration of farmers' mental health. This article tries to find out various factors associated with farmers suicides with a focus on understanding the psychology of farmers. The realm of the

article crosses the barriers of gender by including both male and female farmers and how does their psychology impact their decisions in committing suicides. It also focuses on how the psychology of farmers can be better understood in order to prevent the ever-increasing farmer suicides in the country.

Some case studies related to farmer suicides in India

A study was conducted in Wardha district of Maharashtra, located in the Vidarbha region known for an increasing number of farmer suicides over the decades. The study included 98 family members of suicide victims who did not have any diagnosable psychiatric illness. A semi-structured questionnaire was administered to assess psychological distress. The interviews were conducted by a resident psychiatrist and a psychologist trained in psychiatric evaluation. The control sample consisted of age, sex, and occupation-matched individuals from the same village who were confirmed to be free of any psychiatric illnesses. The study was carried out from July 2008 to December 2009. Among the sample population, 48% were surviving wives, and 27% were parents of the suicide victims. Of the victims' survivors, 62% experienced psychological distress, accounting for 78% of all females in the study, compared to 35% of the male survivors included in the research. Irrespective of gender, spouses of the farmers who committed suicide were more likely to suffer from distress. The most common complaints of distress included unhappiness, loss of pleasure and interest, low appetite, weariness, tremors, sleep disturbances, among others, with up to 32% acknowledging their suicidal thoughts. Despite 45% of the survivors receiving some form of government aid after their family member's suicide, the level of distress did not change (Bhise and Behere, 2016).

Mallesham, perceived as a drunkard in a village in Warangal, Telangana, struggled with alcoholism. Interviews conducted four years after his brother's suicide delved into his drinking habits, family's history of suicides, and their views on caste identity and mental health. Under the government land distribution scheme, Mallesham's father was allocated nearly two acres of barren land on the village outskirts. Their traditional occupation as cobblers/leatherworkers was considered economically unrewarding, and they desired to shift to cotton cultivation, influenced by an upper-caste seed dealer and farmer, Srinivas Reddy. Despite initial success, their crops suffered due to weather conditions and pest attacks, leading to extensive debts and financial distress. To escape the burden of debt, an upper-caste farmer offered to pay off Mallesham's debts in exchange for his land. This crisis led Yellaiah to take his life by consuming the very pesticide he had used to protect his crop. The tragic event caused a chain reaction of suicides in the family, leaving everyone deeply distressed. Mallesham is of the view that his brother wouldn't have committed suicide if they belonged to an upper caste as they were never supported and were even mocked by the upper caste people of the village. They even controlled the resources *eg.* water and even decided its allotment. According to him, if they belonged to upper caste, they would never face harassment from the so-called upper caste (Kannuri and Jadav, 2021).

Decoding the psychology of suicide

Each suicide and suicide attempt stems from the prolonged challenges faced by these individuals, coupled with the traumatic experiences and distress affecting their loved ones.

This makes suicide prevention a critical global concern. As healthcare professionals and researchers, it is incumbent upon us to dedicate ourselves to enhancing suicide prevention by bolstering our capabilities in identifying, intervening, and ultimately preventing suicide and suicidal tendencies. Our primary goal is to advance our understanding of the underlying mechanisms, factors, and enablers of suicidality through interdisciplinary approaches. Suicide represents a profoundly intricate and multi-dimensional phenomenon, influenced by numerous contributing and enabling factors. Its occurrence can be attributed to the interplay of diverse elements, including neurobiology, personal and family history, stressful life events, and the socio-cultural environment (Turecki and Brent, 2016) [12]. Unbearable mental pain stands out as the primary factor behind suicide, as various studies have underscored the significance of psychache in driving suicidal thoughts and actions. Suicide can be viewed as a response to the overwhelming desire to escape from intense psychological suffering. Additionally, psychological elements, such as personality traits, emotional characteristics, and dysregulation, also appear to contribute to this behavior, with increasing recognition of decision-making deficits among those contemplating suicide.

Approximately 45% of individuals who die by suicide consult a primary care physician within 1 month of death, without declaring their suicide desires and ideation (Isometsa *et al.*, 1995). This reporting reveals the inability of people to communicate their feelings about ending their lives. This poor self-disclosure facilitates the suicidal tendencies (Levibelz *et al.*, 2019). De Beurs *et al.* (2019) studied the associated psychological factors behind suicide ideation in individuals using integrated motivational volitional model. They found that of the 20 psychological factors, 12 were directly related to suicide ideation; whereas mental wellbeing, (lack of) social support, goal disengagement, stress, perfectionism, defeat, external entrapment and history of a suicide attempt were not directly related. There was considerable inter-relationship between the factors, none of the factors was isolated. The 12 factors directly associated were: depressive symptoms, internal entrapment, burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, impulsivity, optimism, resilience, acquired capability, mental imagery, exposure, history of suicide attempt and ideation.

Factors associated with Farmers suicides

Socio-economic risk factors

Since farming is a financially perilous profession, socio-economic factors play a major role in risking the farmers' lives at stake. Majority of the farmers in India have either small holdings or they work on rented land and thus they are more prone to such factors. Some socio-economic factors have been discussed below:

- The small landholding of Indian farmers is foremost important risk factor. This smallness of the holding straightaway keeps the farmers from perks of mechanization, modern irrigation, and other investment-based technological improvements. Thus, productivity becomes suboptimal.
- Increasing burden on farmers because of inflated prices of agricultural inputs like chemicals and seeds, agricultural equipment. This has resulted in an overall increase in the cost of cultivation. Though in the year 2023, we have observed the international prices of urea and DAP declining but that of MOP increasing. But the

total input costs still remain to be high.

- Lack of direct integration with the market. Although initiatives such as National Agricultural Market and contract farming are helping integrate farmers' produce directly with the market cutting the role of intermediaries, it is still lagging behind.
- Concentration of these suicides in water-deficit regions of States like Maharashtra and Karnataka is a manifestation of how the water crisis and thereby failure to meet production demands have intensified the penance. Excessive floods or droughts make this situation even worse and in addition to that, farmers are not employing the water harvesting measures.
- Factors like crop failure, unsustainable production, lack of dynamic and comprehensive crop insurance mechanism, and subsequent farmers' indebtedness. While incidents like flash floods have led to crop losses, deferred monsoons have seen production shortfall year-in and year-out. Climate change has made these events relatively more frequent. Since the adaptive capacity of farmers is less, they are more prone to incurring huge economic losses. India's agricultural sector faces several challenges, including unpredictable weather patterns, market fluctuations, and rising input costs. While these issues affect farmers across the board, the impact can be more severe on farmers from marginalized castes who may have limited resources and support networks to cope with these challenges.

Psychological risk factors

To commit suicide is not an easy thing to do. A person attempts to suicide only when he is filled with too much of mental stress and anxiety. There can be different factors which coerce an individual to take such a disastrous step. The psychological factors may or may not be the consequences of socio-economic factors. These factors are discussed below as:

- **Financial Stress:** Farmers often face significant financial challenges due to factors like unpredictable weather conditions, crop failure, rising debts, and market fluctuations. Persistent financial stress can lead to feelings of hopelessness and despair.
- **Social Isolation:** Farming can be an isolating profession, with farmers spending long hours working alone in rural areas. This isolation can lead to a lack of social support, increasing the risk of mental health issues.
- **Casteism:** The discrimination based on caste is a major problem in the country right now. While it is challenging to pinpoint casteism as the sole cause of farmers' suicides, it does play a role in exacerbating the vulnerabilities and hardships faced by farmers, especially those from marginalized castes. Caste-based discrimination also affects the social standing and dignity of farmers from marginalized castes. They may face ostracization and exclusion from community activities, which can lead to feelings of isolation and hopelessness. The psychological impact of discrimination can contribute to mental health issues and increase the risk of suicidal tendencies.
- **Uncertainty and Anxiety:** The uncertainty associated with agriculture, such as the unpredictability of weather and market prices, can create anxiety and stress for farmers, making them vulnerable to mental health problems.

- **Debt Burden:** Accumulating debts, especially when they become unmanageable, can be a significant source of distress for farmers. High levels of debt can lead to a sense of helplessness and increase the risk of suicide.
- **Lack of Access to Mental Health Services:** In rural areas, mental health services are often limited, making it challenging for farmers to seek help for their psychological struggles. One more thing to notice is that seeking psychological help is itself viewed as a taboo in the society. That factor also needs to be addressed.
- **Cultural Stigma:** In some societies, mental health issues are stigmatized, and seeking help for mental health problems may be seen as a sign of weakness. This can prevent farmers from seeking the support they need.
- **Loss of Identity:** For many farmers, their profession is not just a job but a core part of their identity and family heritage. When faced with challenges that threaten their ability to continue farming, they may feel a profound loss of identity and purpose.
- **Environmental Factors:** Exposure to agrochemicals and other environmental factors related to farming practices may have long-term health implications, potentially contributing to mental health issues.
- **Lack of Coping Strategies:** Farmers may lack effective coping mechanisms to deal with stress, depression, and anxiety, which can exacerbate their psychological distress.
- **Interpersonal Conflict:** Family conflicts, disputes over land or resources, or strained relationships with agricultural lenders can also contribute to the psychological burden experienced by farmers.

The impact on farm women

The distressing issue of farmers' suicides in India exacerbates the already dire conditions faced by the agricultural community, who are already struggling with poverty and destitution. Within these families, women face an exceptionally challenging battle for survival. They rely on the traditional hetero-patriarchal structures of marriage and family, which often leave them to fend for themselves, their children, and the elderly. Moreover, they have to endure the anger and harassment from bank and commission agents. On top of all this, they grapple with crop failures, negative returns from farming, essential expenses like school fees for their children, illnesses, emergencies, and various daily chores, such as tending to livestock. We see that the lives of women are majorly dominated by patriarchy which make them more vulnerable in the society where farmer suicide are on a rise. Padhi (2009) ^[7] conducted interviews with 32 women (directly related to those who committed suicides) in Sangrur, Ferozpur and Mansa districts of Punjab. Some of these case studies highlighting the plight of women impacted directly from farmer suicides are presented below:

Harjeet Kaur's family in Ferozpur earns approximately Rs 40,000 per year through a combination of cultivating an acre of land and engaging in wage labor. Sadly, her eldest son took his own life in 2008 due to the burden of farm labor and a life filled with anxiety. The women in the region often face health issues that hinder their ability to work, and the added stress only worsens their well-being.

In 2001 Baljit Kaur's husband from Sangrur tragically took his own life after selling 1.5 acres of their land to partially repay the moneylender's debt. After his passing, she had to take out a loan of Rs 2 lakh. With this loan, she was able to

release one acre of mortgaged land and arrange her elder daughter's marriage. Baljit Kaur mentioned that a simple wedding, along with the minimum required gold, costs at least Rs 2 lakh, which she now needs for her second daughter's marriage. However, she expressed that she is finding it increasingly difficult to keep up with the loan repayments, even as she showed us the documents for the new loan she obtained.

In Mansa district, a 60-year-old woman endured the loss of her son in 2003. Presently, she works as a part-time sweeper in a nearby municipal office, earning Rs 750 per month. However, she spends Rs 8 daily for bus fare, amounting to Rs 200 per month. In addition to her part-time job, she also works for daily wages at Rs 50 per day. The family's annual income is approximately Rs 20,000, which also includes her husband's daily wage of Rs 70 per day. He typically finds work during the peak season when wage opportunities are available for a short period. These chances are usually limited to three months a year, coinciding with both paddy and wheat harvesting. Despite their hard work, the income remains insufficient, and the family always faces financial difficulties. The woman recalls that when she started working, daily wages were only Rs 10 per day.

The stories of this kind are numerous. Undoubtedly, suicide should not be perceived merely as an individual act; rather, it reflects the profound failure of state policies and economic mechanisms, which are currently influenced by the dynamics of global capital. The distressing issue of farmers' suicides across various states in the country, represents only the visible aspect of the larger problem faced by millions of rural poor. This crisis extends far beyond farmers and affects a vast number of people in different ways. Both small landowners and the substantial population of landless individuals, who heavily rely on wage labor in the agricultural sector, are deeply affected by the breakdown of the system. Their struggle is not only for a life of dignity but also for securing a promising future for their children. The challenges they face are critical in shaping the fate of rural communities. Striving for a life of dignity and securing a promising future for their children remains a challenging task for the rural population. The present circumstances serve as a stark reminder of the actions that must be taken by both the state and financial institutions to address the pressing issues. Additionally, active involvement from the peasant movement, women's movement, youth organizations, and other democratic forces is crucial. Understanding the impact of divisive conservative forces and anti-people economic policies on our struggles is essential. This awareness will enable us to envision fresh strategies of resistance and form new alliances across oppressed groups, empowering us to tackle the challenges effectively.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The escalating trend of farmer suicides in India demands urgent attention and comprehensive action. The distressing statistics reveal the grim reality of the agrarian crisis, driven by a complex interplay of socio-economic and psychological factors. The unrelenting challenges faced by Indian farmers, including small landholdings, financial stress, lack of market integration, climate change, and limited access to mental health services, contribute to their vulnerability. This crisis goes beyond individual actions, highlighting the larger systemic failures, both in policy and societal attitudes. The impact of farmer suicides is far-reaching, affecting not only

the farmers themselves but also their families, particularly women who bear the brunt of socio-economic burdens and patriarchal norms. This crisis underscores the need for holistic solutions that address both the immediate financial challenges and the deeper psychological distress faced by farmers. Creating avenues for financial support, market integration, and accessible mental health services is essential. Efforts must extend beyond governmental initiatives, involving collective action from various stakeholders, including farmer organizations, women's movements, and youth groups. The recognition that farmer suicides are a symptom of wider structural inequalities and economic disparities is crucial for formulating effective strategies. Decoding the psychology of suicide unveils the complex web of factors that contribute to this tragic outcome. The psychological distress experienced by farmers is rooted in financial stress, isolation, uncertainty, and deeply entrenched cultural norms. The role of mental health services, destigmatization of seeking help, and building coping mechanisms cannot be underestimated. Moving forward, the multifaceted nature of the crisis requires a multifaceted response. Policymakers, community leaders, mental health professionals, and civil society organizations must collaborate to create a supportive environment for farmers. Addressing both the immediate challenges and the underlying systemic issues is key to preventing the growing wave of farmer suicides in India. In doing so, we honor the invaluable contribution of our farmers and strive to build a more equitable and compassionate society.

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