

# A Study of Trends and Magnitude of Farmer Suicides in India

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**Abstract – Farmer suicides have become so rampant in India that the phrase sounds more like a growing epidemic. More than three lakh farmers, including both cultivators and agricultural labourers, have committed suicide in India between 1995 and 2014. This is roughly equivalent to a shocking figure of one farmer suicide every 30 minutes. The severity of problem of suicides increased among farmers, relative to other occupational groups, after 2001. The rate of farmer suicides which ranged between 1.4 to 1.8 per lakh of population till 2005 has increased to 14.5 per lakh in 2011. The marginal and small farmers holding less than 2 hectare of land constitute 72.4% of total farmer suicides in India. Hence, it is an alarming issue to be looked into with great concern and introspected with extreme delineation. There is a wide array of factors that has led to the increasing spate of farmer suicides in India. The main focus of this study is to find out the ground realities of farmer suicides in India, reasons behind farmer suicides as well as the trends and magnitude of farmer suicides between 1995 and 2014.**

**Keywords: Farmer Suicide, Agriculture, Drought, Crop Failure, Indebtedness.**

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## I: INTRODUCTION

A large proportion of rural masses have not benefitted from the economic growth that took place after 1991. In fact, liberalization has brought about a crisis in the agricultural sector which has pushed many small and marginal farmers into debt and in many cases to suicides. The phenomenon of farmer suicides is especially worrisome for India because nearly half of the Indian population is dependent on agriculture for livelihood. Agriculture, the backbone of Indian economy, contributes about 17.4 percent to India's GDP while it engages nearly 48.9 percent of country's total work force, either as cultivators or as agricultural labourers (Economic Survey, 2015-16).

According to a recent study, more than 3,00,000 farmers have committed suicides between 1995 to 2014 in India. Farmer suicides account for 11.2% of all suicides in India. On an average, one Indian farmer committed suicide every 32 minutes between 1997 to 2005, and since 2002 this has come down to 30 minutes. The farmers' suicide rate in India which ranged between 1.4 to 1.8 per 1,00,000 total population over a ten year period from 1995 to 2005 has increased to 14.5 per lakh in 2011.

### I.1: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ganpati and Venketoo Rao analysed farmers suicides in some parts of Tamil Nadu in 1966 and

recommended that the distribution of agricultural organic-phosphorus compounds be restricted. Nandi in 1979 noted the role of freely available agricultural insecticides in suicides in rural West Bengal and suggested that their availability be regulated. Hedge studied rural suicides in villages of northern Karnataka over 1962 to 1970 and stated that the suicide incidence rate to 5.7 per one lakh population. Reddy, in 1993, reviewed high rates of farmers' suicides in Andhra Pradesh and its relationship to farm size and productivity.

Recently, a large number of studies have been conducted to make an in-depth analysis of farmer suicides in India. The Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai has produced a study of farmer suicides in Maharashtra (Dandekar, 2005), the National Institute Of Rural Development conducted research of farmer suicides in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka (Vidyasagar and Suman Chandra, 2003). Others who have studied different aspects of farmer suicides include Sridhar (2006), Vaidyanathan (2006), Gill and Singh (2006), Jermi (2007), Mitra and Shroff (2007), Mishra (2008), Nagaraj (2008), Sainath (2009), Sheridan (2009), Deshpande and Arora (2010), Das (2011), Dongre and Deshmukh (2012), Kennedy and King (2014), Nagaraj (2013) and so on.

## I.2: OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main focus of this study is to find out the ground realities of farmer suicide rates in India. However, the specific objectives are as follows:

- (i) To make an in-depth analysis of the reasons behind farmer suicides in India.
- (ii) To find out the magnitude of farmer suicides in India.
- (iii) To analyse the trends of farmer suicides in India.

## I.3: HYPOTHESES

- (i) The problem of farmer suicides is not an all-India phenomenon.
- (ii) The suicide rate of farmers has been lower than that of non-farmers.
- (iii) The rate of suicide is higher among male farmers than female farmers.

## I.4: DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The present study is analytical in nature and is based on secondary data. The primary source of data for analyzing the phenomenon of farmer suicides in India has been the Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India (ADSI), an annual publication of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). The NCRB has collected detailed data on farmer suicides for the first time during 2014. According to NCRB, farmers include those who own and work on field (viz. cultivators) as well as those who employ/hire workers for field work/farming activities. The researcher has heavily relied on the official data compiled by the National Crime Records Bureau.

This study is divided in five sections. Section I is introductory in nature, in which review of literature, objectives, hypotheses and methodology is given. A probe into the causes of farmer suicide is attempted in section II. The magnitude of farmer suicide between 1995 and 2014 is presented in section III whereas the trends of farmer suicides during 2014 are given in section IV. The whole study is concluded in section V.

## II: CAUSES OF FARMER SUICIDES IN INDIA

Various reasons have been offered to explain why farmers commit suicides in India—including crop failure, drought, floods, debt, use of genetically modified seeds, illness and drug abuse, family problems a, government policies etc. However, there is no consensus on what may be the main cause but

studies show suicide victims are motivated by more than one cause, on an average three or more cause for committing suicide. Arvind Panagaria stated that “farm-related reasons get cited only around 25% of reasons for suicides and studies consistently show greater reliance on informal sources of credit amongst farmers who commit suicide.” A recent study conducted in 2014 show that there are three specific characteristics associated with high risk farmers: “those that grow cash crops like cotton and coffee; those with marginal farms of less than one hectare, and those with debts of three hundred rupees or more.” (Sainath, 2005) found that “drought, lack of access to credit, failure of cotton cooperatives to pay farmers, rising input costs and falling prices have plunged farmers into mounting debt.”(name)

According to NCRB (2014), the main causes of farmers suicides are indebtedness (20.6%), family problems (20.1%), and crop failure (16.8%) as can be seen from Table-I. However, attributing suicide to a single reason is too simplistic. In fact, suicide is a complex phenomenon. It arises out of an amalgamation of factors, hence, cannot be attributed to a single reason.

**Table-1: Percentage Share of Major Causes of Farmers' Suicides During 2014**

Causes of farmer suicides	Percentage share
Indebtedness/ Bankruptcy	20.6
Family problems	20.1
Farming related issues	17.2
Other causes	14.7
Illness & health related issues	13.2
Drug abuse/ alcoholic issues	4.3
Causes not known	4.1
Poverty	2.6
Marriage related issues	2.1
Property disputes	0.9
Fall in social reputation	0.1

Source: Report of National Crime Records Bureau, 2014

Indebtedness is, in fact, the major cause but it is not only due to farm-related issues as commonly believed. Many studies found that healthcare, marriage costs, education costs and other personal non-productive expenses significantly contribute to farmers' indebtedness. All India Debt and Investment Survey, 2013 revealed that outstanding loans for health reasons have doubled from 3 percent in 2002 to 6 percent 2012. The rise in borrowing for meeting expenditure on illness has become a major factor in the lives of farmers because they lack savings and public health care in India is substandard. According to latest NSSO data, more than half of India's rural population uses private healthcare, which is four times as costly as public healthcare and cost more

than 15 times of normal monthly expenditure of a farmer. India spends only 1.3 percent of its GDP on healthcare and faces a healthcare crisis, especially in rural areas. This crisis is likely to be aggravated due to a reduction in healthcare budget recently.

Besides this, media coverage is also held responsible for increasing rate of farmer suicides in India. Irresponsible media reports of suicides trigger imitative suicides (Bennet & Daniel, 2002). The risk of imitative suicides is the highest during the first three days of reporting and levels off after about two weeks. There are several regions in India such as Vidarbha and Bundelkhand, which gain notoriety for widespread suicides. There is evidence to suggest that the farm suicide outbreak in India could indeed be a contagion, where farmers are committing copy-cat suicide (WHO, 2014) Apathy of political will, absence of alternative income opportunities, and absence of suitable counseling services in rural areas further aggravated the problem.

### **III: MAGNITUDE OF FARMER SUICIDES IN INDIA**

III.1: Annual farmers' suicide incidence rate data on 1,00,000 farmers basis, depend on estimated total number of farmers for that particular year. Estimates for total number of farmers in India vary widely. Some count the total number of cultivators, some include cultivators and agricultural labourers in their definition of total farmers, while others include anyone engaged in any form of farming and agriculture activity. Estimates for total number of farmers in India, for 2011, ranged from 95.8 million (38%) to 263million (22%) to 450 million (38%), out of a total population of over 1.2 million). Others estimate the total number of farmers in India to be about 600 million i.e. nearly 50% of total population). The different estimates of total farmers have led to different suicide incidence rate estimates on per 1,00,000 farmers basis. However, the reliability of official statistics has been questioned by many researchers. K. Nagraj suggests that official statistics may be overestimating the number of total farmers in India, and undercounting the total number farmer suicides every year. On the other hand, Tom Brass suggests that official census and surveys in India systematically underestimate the total number of people engaged in agriculture in India.

III.2: Farmer suicides account for 11.2% of all suicides in India in 1999 whereas it was highest in Lithuania (38.4%) followed by Russian Federation (32.1%). According to a recent study, more than 3,00,000 farmers have committed suicides between 1995 and 2014 in India. On an average, one Indian farmer committed suicide every 32 minutes between 1997 to 2005, and since 2002 this has come down to 30 minutes. The farmers' suicide rate in India which ranged between 1.4 to 1.8 per 1,00,000 total

population over a period of ten years till 2005 has increased 14.5 per lakh in 2011. If we look at the data for two decades since 1995 the highest number of farmer suicides were recorded in 2004 when 18,241 farmers committed suicides. But since then the number of suicides by farmers was gradually falling as can be seen from table II. However, in 2014 it increased to 12360 from 11772 in 2013, constituting an increase of about 5percent.

**Table-II: Farmer Suicides in India from 2004 to 2014**

YEARS	TOTAL FARMER SUICIDES	YEARS	TOTAL FARMER SUICIDES
1995	10,720	2005	17131
1996	13,729	2006	17060
1997	13,622	2007	16632
1998	16015	2008	16796
1999	16082	2009	17368
2000	16603	2010	15964
2001	16415	2011	14027
2002	17971	2012	13754
2003	17164	2013	11772
2004	18241	2014	12360

Source: Report of National Crime Records Bureau, 2014

### **III.3: FARMER SUICIDE RATES COMPARED TO OTHER OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS**

Table III presents farmer suicide rates in the broader context of the few occupational groups for which suicide rates are computed on the basis of available data. (Mayer 2016)\*.

**Table-III: Occupation-wise Suicide Rates in India**

(per 1,00,000)

Occupation category	1997	2001	2011
Unemployed	27.2	22.7	9.0
Civil Servants	22.3	21.2	12.7
Retired persons	14.0	14.5	12.2
Farmers / agricultural workers	12.98	15.7	14.5
Students	2.1	2.5	5.8

Source: Economic & Political Weekly April 2, 2016 pp. 49

In 1997, suicide rate was highest among unemployed- 27.2 per lakh, followed by civil servants- 22.3 and retired persons-14 per lakh. All these categories had higher suicide rates than that of farmers (12.98) in 1997 but since then by 2011 the rate of farmer suicides increased to 14.5 per lakh whereas all other occupations had fallen below that of farmers. Patel claimed that suicide deaths in India among

unemployed individuals and individuals in professions other than agriculture work were, collectively, about three times more frequent than they were in agricultural labourers and landowning cultivators. Even across professions in rural areas, suicide among agricultural workers including farmers in India is not more frequent than any other profession.

### III.4: FARMER SUICIDES BY GENDER

If we examine farmers suicides by gender, as can be seen in Table-III, farmer suicide rates among male were only slightly higher (13.2) than those of females (11.2) in 1997. But by 2011, the rates had significantly diverged; male rates had risen to 14.6 while rates for female farmers had fallen to 5.4, three years later in 2014, male suicide rates had fallen sharply to 6.3 per lakh, that of female to 1.4 as reported by NCRB, 2015.

**Table –IV: Farmer Suicides by Gender**

(per 1,00,000)

Years	Suicide Rate	
	Male	Female
1997	13.2	11.2
2011	14.6	5.4
2014	6.3	1.4

Source: Economic & Political Weekly April 2, 2016  
pp. 49

## IV: TRENDS OF FARMERS' SUICIDES IN INDIA DURING 2014

Out of 12360 suicides during 2014, as per the definition of NCRB Report, 2014 farmer suicides were only 5650. A detailed study of this report reveals many important facts and clears some myths related with farmer suicide in India.

### IV.1: PATTERN OF FARMER SUICIDES ACROSS STATES

The all-India level data cannot reveal important state-level variations. The analysis of state-level data for the year 2014 shows that the problem of farmer suicides is not an all-India phenomenon rather it is much concentrated in a few states. 89.5% of the total farmer suicides in the country were reported in five states viz. Maharashtra (45.5%), Telangana (15.9%), Madhya Pradesh (14.6%), Chhattisgarh (7.8%), and Karnataka (5.7%) as can be seen in Table-IV.

**Table-V: State-Wise Incidence of Farmers' Suicides During 2014**

#### (A) States with Highest Cases of Farmers' Suicides (More Than 300)

Name of the State	Total number of farmers' Suicides	% Share of States to Total number of Farmers' Suicides
Maharashtra	2568	45.5
Telangana	898	15.9
Madhya Pradesh	826	14.6
Chhattisgarh	443	7.8
Karnataka	321	5.7

#### (B) States with Fewest Cases of Farmers' Suicides (Less Than 30)

Name of the state	Total number of farmers' Suicides	% Share of States to Total number of Farmers' Suicides
Odisha	5	0.09
Jammu Kashmir	12	0.21
Haryana	14	0.24
Assam	21	0.37
Punjab	24	0.43

However, there are many states which have reported not a single case of farmer suicide during 2014. To name a few- Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Delhi, Bihar, Jharkhand and Arunachal Pradesh. The main conclusion that emerges from the analysis of the data for the whole country is that the problem of farmer suicides is not a country-wide phenomenon rather it is concentrated in a few central and southern states. Patel found that southern states have ten times higher rates of suicides than some northern states.\*58 But this should not lead to the inference that the agrarian crisis is also concentrated in these few states. The general state of low farm income, stagnation of the rate of capital accumulation, declining rate of the agricultural growth, etc. suggest that the phenomenon of agrarian and rural distress is far more widespread. (Basu 2016)\*epw

### IV.2: SUICIDE RATES FOR DIFFERENT CATEGORIES IN AGRICULTURE

To examine the suicide rates for different categories of participants in agriculture, the detailed breakdown of data was provided in the Report of NCRB, 2014 which is given below in Table-V.



**Table-VI: Suicide Rates In Agriculture During 2014**  
(per 1,00,000)

Category	Suicide rate
All agriculture	4.3
All farmers	4.9
Farmers who own their own land	5.3
Farmers on contract/lease	3.1
Agricultural labour	4.0

Source: Report of National Crime Records Bureau, 2014

The suicide rate for all cultivators including agricultural labourers is 4.3 per lakh during 2014. For all farmers, the rate is 4.9 per lakh; for tenants the over-all rate is 3.1 and for agricultural labour 4.0 per lakh.

#### IV.3: INCIDENCE OF AGE GROUP-WISE FARMERS' SUICIDES

Age-wise and sex-wise data is presented in table-VI. Majority of victims belong to the age group of 30 to 60 years accounting for 65.7% of total farmers suicides during 2014. Farmers committing suicides are below 18 years are only one percent whereas 10.2% farmers are above 60 years.

**Table- VII: Incidence of Age Group-Wise & Sex-Wise Farmers' Suicides**

Age-group	Male	Female	Total	%Share
Below 18 years	35	24	59	1.0
18 to 30 years	1131	169	1300	23.0
30 to 60 years	3480	232	3712	65.7
60 years & above	532	47	579	10.2
Total	5178	472	5650	100

Source: Report of National Crime Records Bureau, 2014

#### IV.4: LAND HOLDING STATUS OF FARMERS WHO HAVE COMMITTED SUICIDES

As per land holding, farmers have been classified in four categories, viz. 'Marginal Farmers'- having less than 1 hectare of land; 'Small farmers' having 1 to 2 hectare of land; 'Medium farmers'-having 2 to 10 hectare of land and 'Large farmers' having more than 10 hectare of land. Land holding status of farmers who committed suicides revealed that 44.5% and 27.9% of victims were small farmers and marginal farmers respectively, they together accounted for 72.4% (4095 out of 5650) total farmer suicides. 53.1% and 14.5% of small farmers who committed suicides were reported in Maharashtra (1135 out of 2516) and Telangana

(366 out of 2516) respectively during 2014. Among marginal farmers, 39.7% and 25.5% respectively of farmers' suicides were reported in Maharashtra (627 out of 1579) and Madhya Pradesh (403 out of 1579). However, in Maharashtra around 47.3% of total farmer suicides were committed by 'well-off' farmers during 2014.

#### V: CONCLUSIONS

**V.1:** The analysis of trends, magnitude and causes of farmer suicides in India reveal many important facts. Suicide is a complex phenomenon hence attributing suicide to a single reason is too simplistic. Farmer suicides have become so rampant in the country that the phrase sounds more like a growing epidemic. More than three lakh farmers, including both cultivators and agricultural labourers, have committed suicide in India between 1995 and 2014. This is roughly equivalent to a shocking figure of one farmer suicide every 30 minutes. Hence, it is an alarming issue to be looked into with great concern and introspected with extreme delineation. There is a wide array of factors that has led to the increasing spate of farmer suicides in India. Although rural indebtedness and family problems are major causes of suicides among farmers yet crop failure, health related issues, property disputes, drug abuse and alcoholism also contribute significantly to the rising phenomenon of farmer suicides in India.

The severity of problem of suicides increased among farmers, relative to other occupational groups, after 2001. The rate of farmer suicides which ranged between 1.4 to 1.8 per lakh of population till 2005 has increased to 14.5 per lakh in 2011. The suicide rate is much higher among male farmers than female ones. The marginal and small farmers holding less than 2 hectare of land constitute 72.4% of total farmer suicides but surprisingly, in Maharashtra around 47.3% of total farmer suicides were committed by 'well-off' farmers during 2014. Majority of farmers committing suicides belong to the age group of 30-60 years.

**V.2:** The in-depth analysis of state-level data suggests that the problem of farmer suicides is not an all-India phenomenon rather it is much concentrated in a few states namely, Maharashtra (45.5%), Telangana (15.9%), Madhya Pradesh (14.6%), Chhattisgarh (7.8%), and Karnataka (5.7%) during 2014. It is a harsh reality that Maharashtra which is one of the highly developed states in India, ranking first in terms of GSDP in 2014-15 and Madhya Pradesh, a recipient of prestigious 'Krishi Karman' Award for the last three consecutive years for its outstanding performance in agriculture sector stood first and third respectively in case of farmer suicides during 2014.

Indian agriculture still suffers from low crop- yield per hectare, low-level of farm income, heavy dependency on monsoon, falling water-levels, stagnation of the rate

of capital accumulation, expensive credit, existence of middlemen and intermediaries who increase cost without adding much value, lack of proper storage and warehousing facilities, successive crop failures, a distorted market, poor procurement prices of crops, laws that stifle private investment and lack of appropriate research. The approach with mere emphasis on credit-expansion or loan-waiving in isolation from above-mentioned factors will not help agriculture. A more pro-active role in creating and maintaining reliable irrigation and other agriculture infrastructure is necessary to address farmer distress and agrarian crisis in India. The development discourse and public policy have to move out from piecemeal approaches that get reduced to income or yield. They should have a livelihood and quality of life focus.

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