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**SOCIO-ECONOMIC, PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SITUATIONAL CAUSES OF SUICIDES OF FARMERS – A STUDY  
IN TELANGANA STATE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Suicides are the leading cause of mortality across the globe. India, which faced drought conditions at least once every three years over the last few decades, is amongst the most vulnerable and drought prone countries in the world. India is the second highest contributor to the total number of suicides in the global pool. India is an agrarian country with around 60% of its people depending directly or indirectly upon agriculture. Farmer suicides account for 11.2% of all suicides in India. Farmer suicide in India is the intentional ending of one's life by a person dependent on farming as their primary source of livelihood. Suicide, in addition to loss of life, also leads to socioeconomic changes in family, causing distress and psychological problems in survivors. In this study is focusing on farmers' suicides as a special group. Almost 90% of persons who commit or attempt suicide has a diagnosable mental disorder. Farmers are an occupational category with high suicide risk and their risk is more than that of the non-farming population. But there is no conclusive evidence as to whether farmers have more psychiatric morbidity than the general population.

**Keywords:** Factors, farmer, mental disorder, occupation, suicide,

## Introduction

In India, it is estimated that 16,000 farmers die by suicide each year, and at rates far above those of the general population. Farmers' suicide has become a major issue of our time, even though both state and central governments tried to ignore the crisis. Every day in newspaper invariably there is news related to farmer's suicide. This is now a public policy concern and has been receiving scholarly attention. According to Kaplan *et al.* (1994), suicide is not a random or pointless act; on the contrary it is a way out of problem or a crisis that is invariably causing intense suffering. Suicide is associated with unmet or unfulfilled needs, feeling of hopelessness and helplessness, ambivalent conflicts between survival and unbearable stress, a narrowing of perceived options and a need for escape. The suicidal person sends out signals of distress.

Worldwide, suicide is among the three leading causes of death among those aged 15-44 years and the second leading cause in the 10-24 years age group. Every year about one million people die from suicide; giving a "global" mortality rate of 16 per 100,000. Mental illness is a well-researched risk factor for suicide. Farmers are an occupational category with high suicide risk. Though farming is considered as a peaceful and healthy way of life, agriculture has the highest rates of mortality in any industry. In some farming communities, suicide rates are reportedly higher than the general population. Nevertheless, data from the extant literature is inconclusive as to whether mental health problems are over represented in these communities.

India, which faced drought conditions at least once every three years over the last few decades, is amongst the most vulnerable and drought prone countries in the world. Since the mid-1990s, India has been experiencing prolonged and widespread droughts in consecutive years, with increased frequency in recent times. It is now well accepted that droughts will pose an increased threat to climate sensitive economic sectors in India, especially agriculture. About two-thirds of India's population depends on agriculture and allied activities, hence drought events are likely to threaten the overall economy of the country. The agriculture in India is primarily dependent on Southwest monsoon rainfall (i.e., on average 80% of annual rainfall occurs between June and September). Due to the temporal and spatial uncertainties of monsoon rainfall, Indian agriculture is at risk. According to National Rainfed Area Authority of India, about 60% of the total cultivated area in India still relies on natural rainfall (rainfed agriculture) and hence changes to rainfall patterns are a significant threat to India's agrarian economy. The direct impact of drought on Indian agriculture is decrease in crop (food grains, cereals, oilseeds etc.), vegetable and fruit production. This creates drastic reductions in farmers' income. The situation becomes worse if the drought prolongs and the groundwater availability for irrigation (as a buffer to sparse and variable rainfall) also declines. Furthermore, drought impacts on livestock results in livestock mortality, poor-productivity, health and fertility. In addition, drought increases the chance of food insecurity, shortage of drinking water, mental and physical health problems, migration for work, and debt etc.

Suicides among farmers, multifactorial causation was the finding. There were more mental disorders in farmers but only common mental disorders, in a backdrop of family history of alcoholism, alcohol use and psychosocial issues like marital, family problems and economic hardships. Depression and alcohol dependence syndrome (ADS) was significantly more in victims than in controls.

## Review of Literature

Revathi (1998) tried to find out the causes of farmers' suicides through conducting a study of 50 deceased farmers in Warangal district which showed that foremost cause of this problem was irrigation, as wells were the largest source of irrigation for about three fourths of the farmers. Generally, the farmers had to bear the expenses for digging of wells. Due to depletion of ground water the cost incurred for deepening of wells was on an average anywhere between Rs. 50,000 to Rs.1, 00,000. Drought again was result of low average rainfall and lack of irrigation facilities. The sources of credit were also an important cause of this problem in the district. The sources of credit available to the farmers besides the institutional ones were commission agents, dealers and subdealers of pesticides and private sources. They generally charged 15 percent to 20 percent higher price over the normal price.

The Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai (2005) conducted a study on farmers' suicides in Maharashtra. The TISS report identified the untenable cost of agricultural production and indebtedness as the key reasons for farmer suicides. With input costs in agriculture escalating and the returns no longer commensurate with the investments made by the farmers, the farmers had incurred heavy losses and were unable to maintain the bare minimum necessary for survival. Growing dependence on the market for agricultural inputs such as seeds, pesticides, fertilizers etc and the declining prices and fluctuation in crop prices in the international market had directly impacted farmers.

The pilot study on farmers suicides in Andhra Pradesh was undertaken by the council for social development, southern regional office, Hyderabad (2005). The study was conducted in five districts of Andhra Pradesh and 125 suicide cases were studied. The main aim of the study was to find out the socio-economic changes which were the causes of farmers suicides. The study revealed that after the commercialization of agriculture there was an increase in the cost of production due to costly input sources like pesticides, fertilizers, seeds and modern machinery that led to farmers suicide in the concerned state.

Sudha (2007) made an attempt to examine the agrarian distress in Andhra Pradesh in context of globalization of agriculture. Warangal district was selected for the study. Out of total farmers in the district, 56 percent were the marginal and 24 percent small farmers. The farmers who committed suicide are small or marginal farmers mainly. The study was based on 50 households of suicide victims in Warangal district. The study concluded that 82 percent of the sampled farmers had annual income below Rs. 15000. Only one farmer had annual income above Rs. 20000. Out of 50 sampled households, 89 percent of the farmers grew only cotton. Among the victims, 64 percent of farmers had started cotton cultivation within 10 years. 22 percent started cultivating cotton within 12 years. This clearly indicated the role of commercialization as a factor. There was a shift from indigenous to hybrid seeds supplied by MNCs.

## Objectives

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To find out the extent and growth of suicides among farmers in India.
2. To identify the suicide victim farmers including their level and pattern of income and consumption.
3. To examine the various factors responsible for farmers suicides.



4. To examine the after effects of farmers suicides on their families.

### Methodology:

The present study is based on secondary data. Secondary data is collected through various sources such as websites, books and journals.

### Farmer suicide in India

India is an agrarian country with around 60% of its people depending directly or indirectly upon agriculture. Farmer suicides account for 11.2% of all suicides in India. Farmer suicide in India is the intentional ending of one's life by a person dependent on farming as their primary source of livelihood. Activists and scholars have offered a number of conflicting reasons for farmer suicides, such as monsoon failure, high debt burdens, genetically modified crops, government policies, public mental health, personal issues and family problems. There is also accusation of states fudging the data on farmer suicides. In 2012, the National Crime Records Bureau of India reported 13,754 farmer suicides. The highest number of farmer suicides was recorded in 2004 when 18,241 farmers committed suicide. The farmer's suicide rate in India has ranged between 1.4 to 1.8 per 100,000 in total population, over a 10-year period through 2005. From 1995 to 2013, a total of 296,438 farmers have killed themselves in India, or an average of 16,469 suicides per year. During the same period, about 9.5 million people died per year in India from other causes including malnutrition, diseases and suicides that were non-farming related, or about 171 million deaths from 1995 to 2013. Historical records relating to frustration, revolts and high mortality rates among farmers in India, particularly cash crop farmers, date back to the 19th century.

Reasons for farmer's suicide in India are as follows;

Reasons for farmer suicides	Percent (of suicides)
Habits like drinking, gambling, etc.	20.35
Failure of crops	16.81
Other reasons (e.g. chit fund)	15.04
Family problems with spouse, others	13.27
Chronic illness	9.73
Marriage of daughters	5.31
Political affiliation	4.42
Property disputes	2.65
Debt burden	2.65
Price crash	2.65
Borrowing too much (e.g. for house construction)	2.65
Losses in non-farm activities	1.77
Failure of bore well	0.88

A study conducted in 2014 found that there are three specific characteristics associated with high risk farmers: "those that grow cash crops such as coffee and cotton; those with marginal farms of less than one hectare; and those with debts of 300 Rupees or more. The study also found that the Indian states in which these three characteristics are most common had the highest suicide rates and also accounted for "almost 75% of the variability in state-level suicides.

Farmers are thus exposed to a high rate of stress. Physical stressors and hazards of the farm environment are compounded by regulatory framework and economic dynamics of managing farm business. These operate in the context of declining trends of trade for agricultural produce, volatile commodity markets, limited availability of off-farm employment, growing cost of machinery and production and loss of farm or livelihood due to crop failures. Economic concerns and government bureaucracy have been consistently identified as a major cause of stress and a contributor to suicide. There is no customary or mandatory retirement age for farmers all over the world and many tend to work beyond the customary retirement age, placing the younger generation in a dependant relationship with their parents for much longer than is typical. This can lead to tension between the two generations on the farm. Recently, we have witnessed such cases in India: The son becoming alcoholic following the father having retired from active government service and taking a dominating and leading role in farming. Roles between work, home and family are often blurred, with farming operating as an occupation and way of life for many farmers.

The importance behind farmer suicides were debt, alcohol addiction, environment, low produce prices, stress and family responsibilities, apathy, poor irrigation, increased cost of cultivation, private money lenders, use of chemical fertilizers and crop failure. In other words debt to stress and family responsibilities were rated as significantly higher than fertilizers and crop failure. In a different study in the same region in 2006, indebtedness (87%) and deterioration in the economic status (74%) were found to be major risk factors for suicide.

### **Drought**

As much as 80% of India's farmland relies on flooding during monsoon season, so inadequate rainfall can cause droughts, making crop failure more common. In regions that have experienced droughts, crop yields have declined, and food for cattle has become scarcer. Agricultural regions that have been affected by droughts have subsequently seen their suicide rates increase.

### **New Economic Policy**

Left leaning economists like Utsa Patnaik, Jayati Ghosh and Prabhat Patnaik suggest that a structural change in the macro-economic policy of Indian Government that favoured privatisation, liberalisation and globalisation is the root cause of farmer suicides.

### **GM crops**

A number of social activist groups and studies proposed a link between GM crops and farmer suicides. Bt cotton (*Bacillus thuringiensis* cotton) was claimed to be responsible for farmer suicides. Bt cotton seeds cost nearly twice as much as ordinary ones. The higher costs forced many farmers into taking ever larger loans, often from private moneylenders charging exorbitant interest rates (60% a year). The moneylender was claimed to collect his dues at harvest time, by compelling farmers to sell their cotton to him at a price lower than it fetches on the market. According to activists, this created a source of debt and economic stress, ultimately suicides, among farmers. Scholars claim that this Bt cotton theory made certain assumptions and ignored field reality. Indian Farmers are Committing Suicide because of Monsanto's costly GMO Crops. Monsanto's were supposed to feed the world hunger and starvation but instead the diverse sustainable organic agriculture was replaced with globalization, GMO crops and monopoly. According to a report by Daily Mail, every 30 minutes an Indian farmer commits suicide as a result of Monsanto's GMO crops. In the last decade, more than

250,000 Indian farmers have killed themselves because of Monsanto's costly seeds and pesticides. Globalization and monopoly have forced farmers to buy GMO seeds and since GMO crops have become pest resistant, the farmers have no choice but to purchase Monsanto's popular herbicide. The Daily Mail called the continuous suicide of Indian farmers a "genocide" in the human history. What's really disturbing is that often time farmers commit suicide by drinking the insecticide shipped to them by Monsanto. After the use of Monsanto's BT cotton, the rate of suicide among Indian farmers increased drastically. The story started when 90% of Indian cotton farmers were forced to switch to Monsanto's Bt crop hoping that Bt crops were pest resistant (so farmers did not have to buy Monsanto's costly herbicide). However after a while, Bt cotton's pests resistant quality started to fade away so farmers had to again buy and use Monsanto's costly herbicide.

In 2011, a review of the evidence regarding the relationship between Bt cotton and farmers' suicides in India was published in the Journal of Development Studies, also by researchers from IFPRI, which found that "Available data show no evidence of a 'resurgence' of farmer suicides. Moreover, Bt cotton technology has been very effective overall in India." Martin Qaim finds that Bt cotton is controversial in India, irrespective of the scholarly evidence. Anti-biotech activist groups in India repeat their claim that there is evidence of link between Bt cotton and farmers suicides, a claim that is perpetuated by mass media. This linking of farmer's suicide and biotech industry has led to negative opinions in public policy making process. Stone suggests that the arrival and expansion of GM cotton led to a campaign of misinformation, by all sides, exacerbating the farmer's situation; activists have fuelled the persistence of a legend of failure and rejection of Bt cotton with sensational claims of livestock death and farmer suicide, while the other side has been incorrectly pronouncing Bt cotton a major success based on literature that is actually inconclusive.

#### State government field surveys (Statistics) on Farmers suicides in Different states

Patel et al. find that southern Indian states have ten times higher rates of suicides than some northern states. This difference, they claim, is not because of misclassification of a person's death, for example as homicide, but because of regional causes. The most common cause for suicide in India's south are a combination of social issues, such as interpersonal and family problems, financial difficulties, and pre-existing mental illness. Suicidal ideation is as culturally accepted in south India as in some high-income countries. The high suicide rates in southern states of India may be hugest Patel et al. in part because of social acceptance of suicide as a method to deal with difficulties.

*Total number of farmer suicides in	2014 2,115	2015 2,997	2016 (Jan-Mar) 116
Maharashtra	1,207	1,841	57 (till Feb 29)
Telangana	503	342	3 (till Mar 11)
Karnataka	156	107	-
Madhya Pradesh	120	-	-
Andhra Pradesh	78	-	-
Punjab	3	495	56 (till Mar 11)
Odisha	-	139	-

\*Farmers and farm labourers  
Source: Union ministry of agriculture and farmers' welfare



In a stark reflection of the continuing distress in rural India, the number of suicides by farmers and farm labourers increased five per cent at 12,360 in 2014 against 11,772 in the previous year, showed a report by the National Crime Records Bureau. Of this, 5,650 were farmers, while 6,710 were agriculture labourers.

The report on Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India in 2014, segregated farmers from those who are engaged in agriculture as labourers, while in 2013 it had included all those engaged in farming, irrespective of being a farmer or a labourer.

Bankruptcy and indebtedness accounted for the major cause of suicides at 22.8 per cent, followed by family problems at 22.3 per cent. Only, 19 per cent of the total farmer suicides in 2014 were related to poor farming, the data showed. Maharashtra with 2,568 suicides topped the chart, followed by Telangana with 898 suicides. Madhya Pradesh too was not far behind and 826 farmer suicides were recorded in 2014. Out of the total 5,650 farmers who committed suicide in 2014, 4,446 owned land, while just 701 had leased land.

The data showed that small and marginal farmers - owning less than two hectares - accounted for around 72.4 per cent of the total suicides, while the remaining held more than 2 hectares. In Maharashtra and Telangana, around 53.1 and 14.5 per cent of the total farmers committing suicide were small and marginal in 2014. Maharashtra, Telangana, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Karnataka accounted for almost 89.5 per cent of the total 5,650 farmer suicides in 2014.

#### **Telangana State Relief package, 2014**

The 29th state of India, Telangana, which accounted for 898 cases of farmers' suicides in 2014, has the second highest number of farmers' suicide in the country. After taking into account the number of suicides, the state has decided to increase the ex-gratia allotted to the next of kin. The Telangana government will now increase the ex-gratia to from Rs 1.5 lakh to Rs 6 lakh to the kin of farmers who had committed suicide, increasing it from Rs. 1.5 lakh that was fixed by the then combined Andhra Pradesh Government in June 2004.

The package was announced after five hours of deliberation by the Telangana cabinet on the issue of farmer suicides and agriculture crisis in districts across the state this kharif season. The four-fold hike in compensation will come into force with prospective effect on September 19, 2014. The Telangana Government has paid ex-gratia of Rs 1.5 lakh each to families of 141 farmers out of the 430 who had committed suicide during the last 15 months.

#### **Effectiveness of government response**

The government's response and relief packages have generally been ineffective, misdirected and flawed states Surinder Sud. It has focused on credit and loan, rather than income, productivity and farmer prosperity. Assistance in paying off outstanding principal and interest helps the money lenders, but has failed to create reliable and good sources of income for the farmer going forward. The usurious moneylenders continue to offer loans at interest rates between 24 to 50 percent, while income generating potential of the land the farmer works on has remained low and subject to weather conditions. Sud states that, the government has failed to understand that debt relief just postpones the problem and a more lasting answer to farmer distress can only come from reliable income sources, higher crop yields per hectare, irrigation and other infrastructure security. Golait, in a Reserve Bank of India paper, acknowledged the positive role of crop diversification initiative announced in government's

response to reports of farmer suicides. Golait added, "Indian agriculture still suffers from: i) poor productivity, ii) falling water levels, iii) expensive credit, iv) a distorted market, v) many middlemen and intermediaries who increase cost but do not add much value, vi) laws that stifle private investment, vii) controlled prices, viii) poor infrastructure, and ix) inappropriate research. Thus the approach with mere emphasis on credit in isolation from the above factors will not help agriculture". Furthermore, recommended Golait, a more pro-active role in creating and maintaining reliable irrigation and other agriculture infrastructure is necessary to address farmer distress in India.

### Conclusion:

Farming is clearly a high-stressed and dangerous occupation. Changing farming practices and various regulations governing it have compounded stressors traditionally associated with agricultural production. A number of studies have found high rates of depression and anxiety among farmers. Various risk factors act in cohesion to culminate into suicide by farmers. Although there are social and geographic variations, farmers' suicide is a global problem that needs detailed evaluation. The preventive strategies used by other nations may not completely apply in the Indian scenario, but it can be a guiding path for more research and formulation of preventive strategies. Farmers face a particular set of issues related to access to health care. Active participation by psychiatrists in prevention and research work in the field of farmers' suicide is now being recognized in India. Heightened visibility among small farming communities may lead to fear of stigma related to seeking psychiatric services. This area needs to be investigated further. In India, 40% of the farmers would want to quit agriculture and take up some other career as a part of insecurity. Work done in south Indian states like Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Karnataka is a success story in field of mental health, but much more needs to be done urgently by us professionals for containment of this issue. It is high time now to take necessary steps otherwise we may be facing extinction of another group from earth, this time a class from our own homo-sapiens species, our food growers - the farmers. It was concluded that a multipronged research approach encompassing that of professionals from mental health, economics, sociology, agriculture and political science in a collaborative manner will provide better understanding and effective solutions for farmers' suicide in India.

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