The Enigma’s of Indian Agriculture Sector: Farmers Suicides in Punjab

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Accepted 2017-06-25; Published 2017-08-01

ABSTRACT:
The recent spate of farmer suicides in Indian states has become the core of research and policy debates in the field of agrarian studies over the last one and a half decades. One sees a flood of publications indicating the causes of these suicides and policy prescriptions. The history of Indian farmer suicides is not new but officially the statistics is available from 1990s. The first state where suicides were reported was Maharashtra. Soon newspaper has gone to report similar occurrences from other states of the country. Growing pressure of indebtedness, rising cost of cultivation, declining returns from agriculture, adverse impact of economic liberalization, etc. are commonly identified as the main causes of this agrarian distress. The present paper made an attempt to analyses the reasons for farmer’s suicide in Punjab and to presents the farmer’s inconvenient condition leading to suicides, its consequences on society and remedies are suggested to address the issue.

Introduction:
The recent spate of farmer suicides in Indian states has become the core of research and policy debates in the field of agrarian studies over the last one and a half decades. One sees a flood of publications indicating the causes of these suicides and policy prescriptions. The history of Indian farmer suicides is not new but officially the statistics is available from 1990s. The first state where suicides were reported was Maharashtra. Soon newspaper has gone to report similar occurrences from other states of the country. Growing pressure of indebtedness, rising cost of cultivation, declining returns from agriculture, adverse impact of economic liberalization, etc. are commonly identified as the main causes of this agrarian distress. The loss of agricultural income and debt weigh so heavily on the minds of certain categories of farmers and push them to the extreme step of self-killing has seldom been Analyzed. The increasing costs of production and the falling farm prices that go hand in hand with Globalization, combined with the decline in farm credit is putting an unbearable debt burden on farmers. This is the burden that is pushing farmers to suicide. Government agencies have deliberately delinked the economic crisis farmers are facing from the psychological stresses that this results in. An attempt has been made to reduce the biggest crisis the Indian peasantry has faced in its long and ancient history to the problem of alcoholism and adultery, in order to protect the unworkable and non-sustainable trade liberalization policies as
the basis of agriculture. The Indian peasantry, the largest body of surviving small farmers in the world, today faces a crisis of extinction. Two thirds of India makes its living from the land. Farmers suicides are the most tragic and dramatic symptom of the crisis of survival faced by Indian peasants. 1997 witnessed the first emergence of farm suicides in India.

**Brief History of Punjab Agrarian System:**

The agrarian tradition of Punjab remained, and was arguably strengthened, under British colonial rule. During this time, Punjab’s agrarian system was most significantly altered by the British contribution of elaborate canal systems in Punjab, named after its “Punj” or Five rivers. This brought significant increase in area irrigated by canals and thus an increase in arable lands for agriculture. The canals ebbed and flowed with the natural cycles of weather and “while [they] only flowed four to five months a year, they provided enough irrigation for the traditional varieties of wheat and rice to grow successfully, while being ecologically sustainable—if only by default—at the same time.” Thus, this robust increase in agricultural productivity did not threaten sustainability. Agrarian debt existed in British times, but the colonial government’s policy was to protect the Punjabi farmer over the money-lender, and it, accordingly, institutionalized safeguards against farmers’ possible indebtedness. British researchers noted an increase in money-lenders with the increase in arable land and agriculture. To quell the problem of growing debt pressure on farmers and prevent the transfer of land from farmers to money-lenders, the British passed the Land Alienation Act of 1900. According to this Act: professional money-lenders could not dispossess a farmer from land held for more than twenty years; the farmer’s plough-cattle, tools, and seeds could not be attached to the loan; the farmer could sue; the interest on the loan could be re-examined and potentially reduced in court; and ancestral land was no longer liable for the farmer’s debt payment unless the debt was charged upon it. Simultaneously, British administrators launched cooperatives to help create an alternative to money-lenders and middle-men, and local arbitration societies to help dispense with lawyers who might employ the legal system against the farmers. Given these colonial safeguards, Punjab at the dawn of Indian Independence in 1947 had an altered and intensified agrarian society that was also generally prosperous and self-sufficient.

**The Green Revolution in Punjab:**

In 1966, as droughts across India threatened food self-sufficiency for the newly independent country, the Central Indian Government, under international pressure, decided to pursue the Green Revolution. Punjab was singled out by the Central Government as the site for the experiment. Despite being a relatively dry state, Punjab’s colonial-era canal network and predominant agrarian population made it ripe for the Green Revolution. Foreign-developed seeds and equipment were introduced to Punjab in order to increase crop yield. The U.S. and international agencies played a key role in ushering in the Green Revolution to India and Punjab. During the late 1960s, India became dependent on subsidized wheat imports from the U.S.

**Objectives:**

- To study the roots for farmers suicide in the Punjab state.
- To study the conception of agriculture sector and to know the causes of farmers suicide.
- To get the facts about the farmers suicide.
- To understand the causes of increasing rural indebtedness.
- To discuss the consequence and to suggest the remedies.

**Incidence and Percentage Change in Suicides cases registered in Farming Sector in Punjab during 2015 and 2016**
This is depicting that the suicides case has been rapidly increased in last year and this is showing that the number of farmers committing suicides are increasing at fast pace.

Causes of Suicides among Farmers Rapid increase in debt:

The major reason for the farmer’s suicide is the heavy indebtedness that the cultivators find themselves. This heavy indebtedness is not an overnight phenomenon that has occurred suddenly. It has its roots in the credit policy that has been followed over a number of years. The indebtedness itself results from a mismatch in the cost of production and the support price and the market price that the cultivators are receiving at the end of every cropping cycle. Heavy indebtedness is spreading across the landholding patterns. The small and the medium sized cultivator is the most affected of the lot, though the large land holder in the rain fed areas of the state too is coming under strain. Indebted farmers in Punjab is 80.7%. According to study conducted by Punjab Agricultural University in district Ludhiana, Fatehgarh sahib, Bathinda, Sangrur and Mansa, it was found that suicide victims committing suicide primarily due to indebtedness (73%) while 27% committed suicide due to other reasons.

Financial institutional credit:

The Green revolution model increased the financial requirements of the farmers resulting in the greater dependency on non-institutional sources of finance. Availability of credit, even after 68 years of Independence, private money lending remains the single largest source of credit to small and marginal farmers. This is so because the banking sector is fast moving out of the credit delivery mechanism. Many small farmers don’t qualify for bank credit, forcing farmers to turn to money lenders, who charge up to 20% interest on a four-month loan. Sometimes even as collateral, farmers often sign away the title to their land.

Most farmers are small and economically unfeasible:

The ground reality is that majority of the farmers in India own as little as two acres of land. Cultivation on such small area is not economically feasible. Such small farmers have become vulnerable. In many cases, the farmers are not even the owners of the land, which makes profitable cultivation impossible because a significant portion of the earnings go towards the payment of lease for the land.

Lack of Pricing Mechanism for farm product:

It is often seen that when sowing season for the kharif and Rabi crops come the prices of the grains reach much more but when harvesting season comes the rate drops. Due to the manipulated pricing the farmers the loser. But they are helpless and they are burdened with debts and unable to meet their commitment due being forced to sell their products at the critically reduced market rate. The government does not seem to be
paying attention to this vicious circle. Nobody has tried to fix the prices based on the cost of the agricultural production. It would be seen that in the last twenty years the prices of the farm product have relatively dropped as compared to the prices of other product.

**Increase in cost of production:**

Agriculture sector in India requires huge manpower for ploughing, digging, soil maintenance etc., for insecticides, pesticides, cutting, transportation and selling of products requires money. In addition to this hybrid seeds are also required for good quality & quantity of product, which are very costly and unaffordable to marginal and poor farmers. Increase in cost of production which forces farmers to commit suicide.

**Ground water depletion:**

Intensive agriculture dominated by paddy–wheat monoculture has led to overexploitation of natural resources in Punjab, especially groundwater. Currently, out of 20 million tube wells in the country, almost 1.3 million are in Punjab, contributing to fast-paced groundwater extraction and its depletion. The problem of overexploitation of groundwater resources is most severe in central Punjab, usually called sweet water zone and dominated by rice crop in the kharif season.

**Lack of alternative sources of income:**

Majority of the state’s population lives in villages and agriculture is the most important activity of the state. But agriculture is highly dependent on climatic conditions. So along with agriculture, allied activities like dairy, poultry, mushroom cultivation etc. can be an alternative source of income but there is lack of initiative from the government in this regard and farmers are not aware of it.

**Illiteracy, traditions & culture:**

Illiteracy, Tradition and Culture also forces the farmers to commit suicide. Due to illiteracy and inadequate knowledge, farmers do not believe in importance of education. Because of lack of education, they turn to rights and rituals of orthodox and other religious activities which again require more money. Sometimes to perform these activities they used to take heavy loans from private money lenders with high rate of interest. In addition to this, marriage of daughters, farmers require to give huge fund and gold to their son in law. If the farmers fail to perform all these traditions and cultural activities they become frustrated and turn towards suicide.

**Cruel circle of money lenders loan:**

For the production of agro product farmers are always in great need of short or long term loans similarly there is also great need of money for farming related activities like taking bore well, pipeline setting purchasing seeds, bees, tractors and others related things to the farm. But there are lot hindrances and impediments while sanctioning such loan amount to the farmers by bank finalizing all the related documents is almost like an ordeal. So most of the farmers at the critical time traditional source of money as like savkar, money lenders come to their help and sanctions loan immediately but charges interest at the very high rate even after accepting all such adversities a natural calamities make a great sabotage to the farm and finally the farmers are totally collapsed because not a single agro product is encased. At last they are left with no option. The continuous pressure from money lenders for the payment of loans and their inability to repay the loan complete, farmers to commit suicide.

**Other Causes**

Lack of basic infrastructural facilities like safe drinking water, inadequate health facilities, transport facilities, proper food, cloth and shelter effects on psychological and physical condition of the farmers. Sometimes they become drug addicted and drunker. All these things attracted heavy diseases and turn them to die.

**Percentage Share of Major Causes of Suicides among Farmers/Cultivators:**
This pie chart is depicting that besides the above explained causes of suicides of farmers, some most common causes are drugs addiction or consumption, marriage related issues, poverty, property disputes among farmers, health issues, family problems, farming related issues and most important among these is the bankruptcy or indebtedness is the root of the farmers suicides in Punjab.

Consequences:
The government must amend laws that are governing the farmers in the Indian agricultural sector. If the government does not make any urgent recommendations or legal provisions to offer relief to the trend of farmer suicide in the affected states, the whole country will suffer the consequences. Some of these are given below:

- National disaster as farmer suicides increase every day.
- Food productivity will be hit badly.
- Food inflation will rise at an alarming rate.
- Severe food crisis.
- The intensity of unemployment problem will be increase.
- Leads to Family problems, Social problems, Physiological problems.

Suggestions:

Legalized Contract Farming:
It should be legalized and violation of the contract should invite penalty on the either side. The firms should also take additional responsibilities such as providing institutional credit, provision of proper training facilities and agricultural input facilities in order to sustain CF arrangements as such mechanisms will help in building mutual trust with each other.

Social Support:
Social support provides a buffering effect for stress, the greater the support from friends, family, local communities, national policies and society as a whole, the less impact stress will have on individuals and families. Its moral duty of everyone who eats has a stake in small farmer’s well-being.

Effective Minimum Support Price:
Only an effective minimum support price mechanism for agricultural produce should appropriate with consideration increase in agricultural inputs.

Promote advanced public research:
Promote relevant public research in agriculture, particularly dry land agriculture, for the development of drought and disease resistant seeds of cereals and pulses helps in increasing the crop productivity.

Provide free Agriculture farm training:
In order to solve the problems of farmers. We should train them in modern method of cultivation. They should learn to employ scientific method. Update our agriculture research and try improving our agricultural yield. Our farmers must be taught to use better seeds, proper manure and fertilizers and appropriate machines to improve the quality and output of one agricultural produce.

Government must promote Sustainable Agriculture:
Chemical agriculture, which is being adopted by farmers it is not only highly expensive but also environmentally damaging and health hazardous. Sustainable agriculture with farm produced seeds, organic manures; non-pesticide management etc, is proved to be cost-effective. Hence, Government should extend incentives, subsidies, credit and other support to sustainable agriculture to reduce
farmer’s expenditure on cultivation and to make agriculture profitable and sustainable.

**Strengthen the banking system for farmers:**

Government must focus on ensuring that the formal banking system in the rural areas covers all the credit requirements of farmers and others, and that the coverage of the formal financial system is extended to all rural households and also focus on Setting up a Distress Fund that will provide support to banks in chronically drought prone areas, and permit some debt relief to cultivators in extreme distress.

**Professionalization of Agriculture:**

Farmers need to be advised and guided on economical methods of cultivation which would save finances for them. The technological advancement in agriculture should be passed down to the small farmers. Where the existing crops would not do well under current drought and weather conditions, the farmers could be helped to shift to the cultivation of crops that would be easy and economical to cultivate in adverse conditions. Agriculture should be approached professionally and not as a traditional occupation. The government could also explore the possibility of pooling of the lands of small farmers and making a bigger chunk of economically cultivable land. Through pooling of lands, the small farmers can avail the economies of cultivating on a larger scale. Just like an industrial zone, there is an urgent need to establish special agricultural zones, where only farming and agriculture related activity should be allowed.

**Effective Crop Insurance Policies:**

Crop failures are a disaster for farmers and their families. Therefore governments should make legal provision about crop insurance because they need farmer's stake money from private lenders or banks or other financial institutions but when the crops fail, they are left with no option other than death.

Counseling to farmers:

The problem cannot solve through economic package alone what is needed in social and spiritual interventions so that farmers should realize that suicide is not the way out they should understand that they need to develop self-confidence. The future generation should have the mental strength to face life challenges. So the public and private organizations to come up with the counseling seminars, gatherings, public politicians meeting to eradicate this social evil.

**Conclusion:**

The trend can be reversed through active participation of the Government in addressing the real issues of the farmers that are driving them to suicides. Social responsibility also goes a long way to help the farmers. Farmer’s leaders and social leaders should come together and help the farmers and should reduce the rate of suicide. Other way is to focus upon implementation of income generating activities which may reduce the farmer suicide. It is necessary to encourage the farmers to adopt all allied activities like dairy, fishery and poultry etc. with farming activities. Set up a commission with statutory powers that takes decisions on the issues such as genetic modification technology and its impact on Indian agriculture, agriculture pricing policy and cropping pattern. Government should increase public expenditure on rural development.

**References:**