



bitterharvest

Vishav Bharti
vishavbharti@gmail.com

SANGRUR/BARNALA: Visiting a labour colony in any village of the cotton belt in Punjab, you'll find cold hearths and locked doors punctuating the dilapidated houses lining the streets.

These are homes deserted by the widows and orphans of rural labourers, whose death left behind irredeemably altered lives for the survivors. The households in suspension tell the woeful tale that befalls the family of every labourer who dies, whether of natural cause or suicide — more often it is the latter.

"I am the custodian of their house in their absence. I am waiting for the children to return," says Gurjant Singh, pointing towards two rooms next to his own hutment.

It's been long since Gurjant, a farm labourer of Khadyal village, last saw his younger brother's children. It would be a while

Dead end for labourer's widow, kids

TRUNCATED LIVES With the man gone — often in suicide — there is no life for the family in the village. Shutting home and going away to the maternal family is the only option — till the kids are grown, and the story begins all over again

before they are grown up, which is when Gurjant expects them to return to what was once their home.

Burdened by a debt of Rs 15,000, his brother Maghar Singh had committed suicide around 15 years back. Unable to find work or manage ration on credit, Maghar's widow was unable to fend for the little kids. Two years later, she ended it too with a pesticide. As is the custom among rural labourers, the two surviving daughters and a son left home to be brought up by their maternal uncle.

When a labourer commits suicide or dies leaving behind young kids, you will rarely find his widow and children staying back in the village, says Sher Singh, a former sarpanch of Dhandoli, a nearby village.

The life of a labourer's widow is much worse than a farmer's widow. A farmer's widow usually stays on in the village, as she would have land to raise

the kids on. But a labourer's widow has no asset but her hands, Sher Singh says. Also, nobody lends the widow any money, as she has limited resources to repay. Snide remarks from villagers at every step don't make it any easier.

"Often, after the main male member of a family commits suicide, the widow follows suit," says Harjinder Singh, a farm labour activist from Sangrur. A 2009 PAU survey on suicides by agricultural labourers confirms the bitter reality. From 2000 to 2008, over 50 women in Sangrur and Bathinda committed suicide owing to debt.

It is no less harsh for kids without a father, whose childhood comes to a most abrupt end. Unable to pay debt, the father of Jagseer Singh of Kale Ke village in Barnala left home two years back, never to return.

At the age of 12, Jagseer is today an attached labourer, while Jyoti, his eight-year-old sister, is a student of Class II.

CHILDHOOD YOKED

A study commissioned by the Punjab State Farmers Commission three years ago had confirmed that about 4 per cent of the attached labour in Punjab falls in the category of child labour. Another 37 per cent falls in the age group of 14-20 years.

Their mother, who suffers from mental retardation, cleans people's cattle sheds.

However, the small farmer Roop Singh, for whom the kids work, claims he is doing a good deed in "raising these children". Jagseer's daily chores involve fetching the fodder and cleaning cattle sheds, while Jyoti washes dishes and baby-sits the farmer's kids along with her studies.

Yet, none of the three know what they earn between them.

Neither of them holds a bank account, nor do they get any wages in hand. Jagseer's uncle Major Singh laments, "Being a BPL family, they are entitled to 35 kg of wheat per month at subsidised rates. But even that does not reach them".

Back at Khadyal village, Gurjant pulls out a picture of his nephew Kuldeep from his wallet. It's an old passport-size snap from when the boy was a little kid. A few years from now, a grown Kuldeep will return to open the door of his home closed since the death of his father. But the life's grind has already begun for the boy now in Class X — he is a part-time labourer.



(Left) Jagseer Singh (12), who along with his widowed mother and a sister works for a small farmer, and (above) the locked door of a tenement in Khadyal village abandoned by the children of a labourer who ended his life and was followed by his wife.

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