

# Escape only in death

**SILENT PASSING** Debt, suicide among farm workers no less rampant than farmers, yet no one, not even the government, takes note



**bitterharvest**

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**MANSA:** A decade back, Nata Singh, an attached labourer of Hodla village, tried to get away from debt by consuming a pesticide. "Unfortunately", he survived. His miseries survived too. Today, reeling under a debt of Rs 70,000, including Rs 45,000 borrowed for his treatment, he curses those who carried him to the doctor.

Such stories of survival and suicide abound all across the villages of Punjab's cotton belt.

In his mid-fifties, Nata has seen himself as nothing but an attached labourer (earning Rs 32,000 annually), and like most labourers, he inherited the debt. But he says there was no "solid" reason behind his attempt to suicide. "I was upset and would often get agitated," he says. However, Bhappi, his wife who cleans people's cattlesheds, knows the real reason: "He was helpless against

the debt, and there is no hope of ever paying it back".

Debt-related suicides are as common among rural workers as among farmers, says Zora Singh Nasrali, president of the Punjab Khet Mazdoor Union. "But their voice is never heard like farmers'. The agrarian crisis has never been explored beyond the crisis of farmers".

Even the Punjab government's own report of a survey of Bathinda and Sangrur districts conducted last year tells that from 2000 to 2008, a total of 1,133 rural workers committed suicide due to debt. Out of these, 483 were from Bathinda and 650 from Sangrur.

"All these people died in sheer hopelessness," says Nasrali.

According to PAU economists who conducted this survey, the condition of labourers in Mansa district would be much grimmer as the conditions there are considered far more oppressive for them.

Yet, the activists feel, the government is doing nothing except conducting one survey after another. "It makes news, but the government hardly does anything about it, and the media too forgets after reporting the survey," says Harbhagwan Bhikhi, a rural activist from the CPI-ML.

In the absence of any government support, conditions



■Nata Singh at a farm in Hodla village, Mansa, where he works.

are even worse for the labourers' families. Suicide might offer an end to the labourer's woes, for the family it is the beginning of yet another struggle. "The worst affected by a debt-related suicide are the children and widows. Neither do they get loan, nor do they have any assets to repay the debt. Children are forced into child labour and widows are some-

times pushed into prostitution. In several cases, they too give up on life," says Nasrali.

It is a strange reality among labourers that when a family falls apart, there is no division of property, but there is division of debt. Nata also inherited Rs 8,000 as debt. He has worked day and night only to see it swell to Rs 70,000 today. Nata's health is giving way.

## 70 PER CENT IN DEBT: STUDY

"Status of Local Agricultural Labour in Punjab", a report prepared in 2007 by Punjabi University, Patiala, for the state government, clearly indicated that more than 70 per cent of agriculture labourers in Punjab are under debt. "But the government was not ready to accept there are suicides among agricultural labourers. It was not even ready to consider the report on suicide among agriculture labourers prepared after a door-to-door study done by Punjab Agricultural University, in which astonishing facts have come up to the fore. It became possible only after we struggled for it," says Zora Singh Nasrali. **HTC**

He hardly has another five-seven years of work left in him. His son Amandeep Singh is already a daily-wager for many years, yet "the amount of debt is increasing every year," Bhappi says.

"Wouldn't it have been better had I not survived that day?" asks Nata, leaving you at a loss for an answer.

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