

Farmer Suicides in Punjab

Incidence, Causes, and Policy Suggestions

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The article is based on a primary survey carried out to ascertain the magnitude and determinants of deaths of farmers by suicide in six districts of Punjab. It recommends the provision of financial compensation to victim families, waiving of debt, and strengthening of public healthcare and education system as the main policy measures for addressing this tragic phenomenon.

India is an agriculture-dependent nation where the socio-economic condition of the farmer is worrisome. Over the past two decades, the number of farmer suicides in the country has been on the rise. During the last two decades, more than 3.5 lakh farmers died by suicide in India (NCRB 2017). Currently, the issues of suicide have become an index of the crisis in India's agriculture and have led to widespread discussions and debates through print and vernacular media. As reported by the media, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Punjab are the worst-hit states where the magnitude of suicides has reached alarming proportions.

Punjab, popularly known as the "food bowl" of the country, remains shackled in a difficult phase of agrarian crisis that has witnessed 16,606 farmer and agricultural labourer suicides during 2000–15 (*Tribune* 2018: 1). Over the years, Punjab agriculture in general and small farming in particular is becoming a less profitable occupation due to rising fixed and variable input costs and non-remunerative sale prices of farm produce. Unable to generate sufficient earnings due to capital intensive technologies, small farmers have been leaving farming. As a result, around 2 lakh small farmers, who were operating two hectares of land, left farming in Punjab between 1991 and 2011 (Singh and Bhogal 2014: 1365).

In the absence of alternative sources of income, the basic needs like expensive education of children, costly healthcare, and high cooking gas prices become a financial burden on the farmers. In order to make both ends meet, the farmers have become heavily dependent on commission agents (*arhtiyas*) due to non-availability of consumption loans from institutional sources and their high transaction costs (Singh et al 2007: 31).

This vicious cycle of taking more costly loans just to carry on cultivation in the hope of turning around their finances and repaying previous loans with high accrued interest burdens pushes farmers into accepting exploitative informal lending at an exorbitant rate of interest, which leads to indebtedness. The heavy debt burden has wrecked the condition of farmers making them helpless and distressed, which ultimately pushes them towards dying by suicide. The intensity of this crisis in Punjab calls for a serious attempt to investigate individual cases in a comprehensive manner. The present study attempts an objective assessment of the incidence and causes of suicides by farmers along with its ramifications in six districts of Punjab, namely Barnala, Bathinda, Ludhiana, Mansa, Moga, and Sangrur.

Approach of the Study

The present study on the deaths of farmers by suicide in the six districts of Punjab was carried out by the Department of Economics and Sociology, Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana in four phases for the period 2000 to 2018. The first phase survey was carried out in Bathinda and Sangrur between 2000 and 2008 (*Research Report* 2009) followed by another phase that included four districts, namely Barnala, Ludhiana, Mansa, and Moga for the period 2000–10 (Singh et al 2012). The third phase survey was conducted in 2016 in all the six districts for the period 2000–15 (Singh et al 2017). The fourth phase survey was undertaken in 2019 (Singh et al 2020) in which the cases of farmer deaths by suicide of all these six districts for the period 2016 to 2018 were studied. The present study consolidates the total number of deaths by suicides of farmers reported in all the surveys for 2000 to 2018. All the villages falling in the jurisdiction of the six districts were covered in the door-to-door and village-to-village survey.

First, a list of suicide cases was prepared with the help of sarpanch, panchayat members, and chowkidar of the village. The family members of the victims of death by suicide were personally

The authors are grateful to the anonymous referee for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of the article.

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interviewed through a pretested questionnaire to analyse the exact causes of suicide and assess the economic, social, and psychological distress of the family at the time of suicide and after the suicide of the victim.

The information was collected on the economic position of the family, magnitude of debt (institutional and non-institutional), farm size, causes of suicide, living conditions of dependents, assets (including land) owned, and assets sold by the family to pay off the debt. The information on social relations within the family, the social/marital discords among family members, the mental stability of the victim, etc, was obtained from the family. In the next step, this information was authenticated by the sarpanch, other elected member of the village and/or one or more elder persons of the village for accuracy.

Extent and Magnitude

Now we will first discuss the extent of suicides in each studied district and the trend over the years; the farm size category-wise distribution of suicide victims, the extent of suicides in a family, gender issue, and the mode adopted for death by suicide.

District-wise cases of farmer suicides:

Suicide is a complex phenomenon, which occurs due to social, economic and psychological factors, and combinations thereof. The high magnitude of suicides in the six districts of Punjab throws light on the grim situation of farmers in the state. In these areas, as many as 9,291 farmers died by suicide during 2000–18 (Table 1). The highest magnitude of suicides was found in Sangrur district with 2,506 reported suicide cases, followed by 2,098 suicides in Mansa, 1,956 in Bathinda, 1,126 in Barnala, 880 in Moga, and 725

Table 1: District-wise Cases of Farmer Suicides in Punjab, 2000–18

District	Number of Suicides
Barnala	1,126
Bathinda	1,956
Ludhiana	725
Mansa	2,098
Moga	880
Sangrur	2,506
Overall	9,291

Source: Compiled by the authors.

in Ludhiana. The high number of such reported cases of suicides is undoubtedly a matter of grave concern in the so-called agriculturally developed state of India.

Year-wise distribution of suicide victims:

The devastation in the Punjab by suicides did not show any particular trend across the study period as revealed in Table 2. The number of suicide cases was the highest (630) in 2008 and declined thereafter. This decline in suicide cases may be an outcome of the “Debt Waiver Scheme” of the union government initiated in 2008. Overall, about 88% of the farmers died by suicide due to heavy debt burden. The number of debt-related suicide cases was the highest (515) in 2015, which may be due to the cotton crop failure. Cotton is the major commercial crop of Bathinda, Mansa, Sangrur, and Barnala districts, and the productivity of American cotton was the lowest (197 kg/ha) in 2015 over last three decades. It is also important to note that the total number of suicides (288) and debt-related suicides (281) was the lowest in 2016. There may be primarily two reasons behind this phenomenon. First, the productivity of American cotton remained the highest (760 kg/ha) in 2016 during the last one decade. Second, the

Table 2: Year-wise Distribution of Debt and Non-debt-related Farmer Suicides in Punjab

Year	Debt-related Suicides (Number)	Non-debt-related Suicides (Number)	Total
2000	458 (84.35)	85 (15.65)	543 (100)
2001	429 (82.18)	93 (17.82)	522 (100)
2002	415 (81.21)	96 (18.79)	511 (100)
2003	419 (79.36)	109 (20.64)	528 (100)
2004	419 (82.00)	92 (18.00)	511 (100)
2005	398 (82.74)	83 (17.26)	481 (100)
2006	371 (83.37)	74 (16.63)	445 (100)
2007	477 (84.13)	90 (15.87)	567 (100)
2008	490 (77.78)	140 (22.22)	630 (100)
2009	433 (87.65)	61 (12.35)	494 (100)
2010	478 (86.90)	72 (13.10)	550 (100)
2011	483 (91.13)	47 (8.87)	530 (100)
2012	465 (96.27)	18 (3.73)	483 (100)
2013	477 (96.56)	17 (3.44)	494 (100)
2014	458 (96.62)	16 (3.38)	474 (100)
2015	515 (95.90)	22 (4.10)	537 (100)
2016	281 (97.57)	7 (2.43)	288 (100)
2017	302 (98.05)	6 (1.95)	308 (100)
2018	379 (95.95)	16 (4.05)	395 (100)
Total	8,147 (87.69)	1,144 (12.31)	9,291 (100)

Figures in parenthesis are percentages.

Source: Compiled by the authors.

announcement of a complete debt-waiver of the farmers by the ruling party in the election manifesto in Punjab was made in 2016. Unfortunately, the number of suicide cases again followed a rising trend, going up from 302 in 2017 to 379 in 2018. Overall, the proportion of debt-related suicide cases shows a rising trend over time.

Farm size-wise distribution of suicides:

Punjab farmers in general and small peasantry in particular have been passing through an economic crisis. It is a fact that the size of the farm is the major factor, which determines the income level and economic status of the farm households. Table 3 reveals that out of a total 9,291 farmer suicide cases more than 77% were those of marginal and small farmers who cultivated up to two hectares of land. It is important to note that the number of these small landholdings is around 34% of the total landholdings in the state. The semi-medium and medium farmers accounted for about 22% of the total farmer suicide cases. The proportion of suicide cases among the large farm size category was just 0.47% in all the six districts. It is significant to note that marginal and small farmers were the main victims of this phenomenon as these farmers have been facing more pressure as compared to large farmers due to small volume of production, low marketable surplus, and scarcity of capital.

Gender classification and intensity of suicide:

The crisis in the agrarian economy of Punjab is so severe that in many farm families not only one person but two or more members of the family died by suicide. Our field survey revealed that around 93% of the affected households were of those where one suicide had occurred. However, it is very tragic to know that in 7% of the families there

Table 3: Farm Size-wise Distribution of Suicides in Punjab, 2000–18

Size of Operation Holding	Number	Percentage
Marginal (<1 ha)	4,233	45.56
Small (1–2 ha)	2,929	31.53
Semi-medium (2.01–4 ha)	1,531	16.48
Medium (4.01–10 ha)	554	5.96
Large (> 10 ha)	44	0.47
Total	9,291	100.00

Source: Compiled by the authors.

were two or more cases of suicides (Table 4). It is also seen that male farmers were the main victims of this crisis as 92% of the total deaths by suicide were by the male members. However, 8% were female members who became the victim of this phenomenon.

Table 4: Gender Classification and Intensity of Suicides

Description	Percentage
Male suicides	91.80
Female suicides	8.20
Household with one suicide	92.90
Household with two or more suicides	7.10

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Modes of suicide: How a person kills themselves is another parameter to know the depth of this crisis. In a true Durkheim way, the suicide phenomenon is represented in the conditions of loss of meaning, confusion, and disorientation among the people. That most victims choose to end their lives by consuming pesticides symbolise the key source of distress; agriculture itself and its new inputs, engaging with which has led to their ruination (Vasavi 2009: 125–27). The same could be said of the victim farmers of Punjab where consumption of pesticides was the most common mode of suicide (Table 5). Around 72% of the suicide cases were occurred with the consumption of pesticides, while 13% of the farmers died by suicide by hanging themselves. Jumping in front of a train or in waterbodies was a mode of suicide adopted by about 11%.

Causes of Suicide

Suicide is the offshoot of a complex range of factors that have been driving farmers to end their life irrespective of what triggers the act. Majority of the studies conducted on suicides among agricultural community provides firm evidence that the deceased farmers were

Table 5: Mode of Suicides among Farmers

Mode of Suicide	Number	Percentage
Consumption of pesticides	6,652	71.6
Hanging themselves	1,217	13.1
Jumping in front of a train	400	4.3
Jumping into a well/river	418	4.5
Others*	604	6.5
Total	9,291	100.0

* Others include electrocution, jumping from the roof, taking rodenticide, celphos, etc.

Source: Compiled by the authors.

under huge debt and had experienced chronic domestic discord, social isolation, injured self-esteem, and so on (Singh 2018: 15; Sidhu et al 2011: 133). It is imperative to probe the causes of farmers' indebtedness. An extensive study of the Punjab State Farmers Commission (PFSC) revealed that as much as 74.8% of credit was incurred for production purposes—tractorialisation (12.70%), farm inputs (44.1%), irrigation structures (2.47%), and others (15.53%). Whereas over 25% of the credit was used for consumption purposes which includes house construction (10.3%), marriages (7.7%), domestic expenditure (3.5%), and others (3.7%) (Singh et al 2017: 41). Moreover, the tractor farmers were more heavily indebted than other farmers (Singh et al 2007: 43). The low farm profitability due to low crop prices, stagnant productivity, and crop failure were the major reasons of the farmers' plight (Singh et al 2014: 252). It is pertinent to note that in Punjab almost one-fourth of the small farmers owned tractors, but these tractors do not have the economic viability due to the smaller size of their operational landholdings of less than two hectares, which was the other reason for indebtedness among these farmers (Singh et al 2007: 42; Singh 2018: 16).

Farmers were indebted historically. In fact, as far back as the early 1920s, Darling (1925) in his classic research work remarked that “the Punjab peasant is born in debt, lives in debt and dies in debt.” But, the question raised by the academicians and media is why the suicide phenomenon had not occurred then, though peasantry was under vicious circle of debt at that time. To address this question at a reasonable level, we must analyse the changing agrarian scene during the last one century. Basically, before the green revolution in the state, the subsistence farming was prevalent, in which farm inputs were home produced and farm output was intended for home consumption. But after the mid-1960s, the green revolution strategies initiated commercial farming in which both farm inputs and farm outputs were linked with the market. The borrowed funds at exorbitant interest rates, especially from private agencies, pushed them towards

a debt trap. Moreover, the policies of neo-liberalism reduced farm profitability through expensive farm inputs, stable real crop prices and restricted farm subsidies. Likewise, the privatisation of social services (health, education, and domestic services) also weakened the family budget of the people. This situation led the capital-scarce peasantry towards an economic squeeze, indebtedness, and suicides.

Table 6 reveals that the heavy debt burden appeared as the major cause of suicide in about 88% of the cases. Family discords emerged as the second most important reason among 17% victims. Crop failure and health ailments appeared as the next important concerns among 8.32% and 6.27% of the victims, respectively.

Table 6: Reasons for Deaths due to Suicide

Particulars	(Multiple Response)	
	Number	Percentage
Heavy debt burden	8,147	87.69
Family discord	1,596	17.18
Crop failure	773	8.32
Illness and health problems	583	6.27
Land confiscated by bank	337	3.63
Court case/litigation	20	0.22
Harassment by moneylenders/banks, etc	20	0.22
Others*	588	6.33

* Loss in self-employment/enterprise, drug addiction, social isolation, etc.

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Farm size classification of suicide cases according to debt: The suicide victims of different farm size categories were classified into debt and non-debt category on the basis of level of debt/acre, level of income of the family and assets (including land) owned and assets sold by the family to pay off the debt. On the basis of this criterion, the observations of the study found that around 88% of the suicide cases fell in the debt category and the remaining about 12% occurred due to non-debt reasons. The farm size-wise distribution clearly depicts that the main reason for small farmer suicides was heavy debt burden, as over 89% of these victims were motivated by the heavy debt as compared with large farmers where debt-related cases were around 57%. As the farm size increases the proportion of suicide cases with heavy debt burden decreases. Around 43% of the large farmers died by suicide due to non-debt

Table 7: Farm Size-wise Distribution of Suicide Cases into Debt and Non-debt Reasons

Category	Debt	Non-debt	Total
Marginal (<1 ha)	3,771 (89.09)	462 (10.91)	4,233 (100)
Small (1–2 ha)	2,615 (89.28)	314 (10.72)	2,929 (100)
Semi-medium (2.01–4 ha)	1,299 (84.85)	232 (15.15)	1,531 (100)
Medium (4.01–10 ha)	437 (78.88)	117 (21.12)	554 (100)
Large (> 10 ha)	25 (56.82)	19 (43.18)	44 (100)
Total	8,147 (87.69)	1,144 (12.31)	9,291 (100)

Figures in parentheses are percentages.
Source: Compiled by the authors.

reasons (Table 7). It was noted during the survey that the marginal and small farmers have to depend upon the borrowed funds, which are to be repaid after the crop harvest. With meagre incomes, which are insufficient to meet the rising basic farm and domestic expenditure, repayment of debt becomes a trap that set off a vicious cycle of indebtedness.

Socio-economic and Implications

Various factors that pertain to the family members of the victims such as socio-economic status at the time of suicide and after suicide, the social and psychological impacts of suicide, habits of the deceased, and the opinion of family on the relief measures are the focus of the following discussion.

Socio-economic characteristics of victims:

The critical analysis of empirical evidences available on farmer suicides in Punjab hints that the disappointment and despair of the suicide victims, associated with the loss of agricultural income and rising indebtedness, had its origin in the growing economic distress. The socio-economic characteristics of the victim families are considered as key ailments which determine the stress level of the family. The information on the socio-economic profile of suicide victims revealed that relief measures around 75% cases were in the prime age of 19–35 years (Table 8). This is alarming and indicative of something drastically wrong with the social situation in which Punjab’s rural youth is placed. Insofar as education level of the deceased is concerned, it was seen that around 75% of the victims were illiterate or with primary education

without meaningful opportunities for alternate employment. Sadly, around 1% of these victims were graduates or post-graduates. This shows that the large section of peasantry, whose level of education is very low, is the main victim of this phenomenon. About 45% of the victims were illiterate and only 6% studied up to higher secondary. About 74% lived in semi-pucca houses and only 5% had any involvement in sociopolitical activities. The spirit of individualism and decline of the traditional social support mechanism has pushed the farmers towards suicide as fostered by Gill (2005) in his study.

Table 8: Socio-economic Profile of Suicide Victims

Particulars	Number	Percentage
Age (years)		
Below 18	311	3.35
19–30	3,100	33.37
31–35	3,833	41.25
46–60	1,686	18.15
Above 61	361	3.88
Education level		
Illiterate	4,177	44.96
Primary	1,497	16.11
Middle	1,347	14.50
Matriculate	1,567	16.87
Higher secondary	590	6.35
Graduate	92	0.99
Postgraduate	21	0.22
Type of residence		
Kutcha	443	4.77
Semi-pucca	6,891	74.17
Pucca	1,957	21.06
Participation in sociopolitical activities*		
Panchayat	189	2.03
Kisan union	285	3.07
Social and religious organisations	148	1.59
No involvement in any sociopolitical activity	8,950	96.33
Overall		100.00

* Multiple response.
Source: Compiled by the authors.

Social and psychological impact of the suicide on the victims’ families:

The families of suicide victims were found to be suffering from a dire sense of fear and social insecurity as well as severe psychological disturbances. As much as one-third of the families lost their bread earners and hence had no earning member in the family (Table 9). One can imagine the economic status of the family where the sole bread earner has lost their life, and how the families cope with the situation. Further, depression crept into the lives of around 28% families. About 13% of the families had to bear the brunt by selling off their land, the only means

of livelihood. It is unfortunate to know that 11% of the families’ children had to discontinue their education. The vagaries of fortune did not stop here; it was sad to note that the marriage of children in victim families were also disrupted in 3.4% cases. This situation arises mainly in the case of the daughter’s marriage, as the act of suicide is considered a social stigma for the family. Generally, people are least interested in any relationship with the family which is economically worse off or have died by suicide due to debt burdens. This shows that deceased persons have been passing through a trauma that is not only economic but also social and psychological.

Level of consumption of intoxicants by the deceased:

The level of substance abuse is very high in Punjab. Table 10 reveals that the proportion of non-drug addicts among the suicide victims was 44.09%. However, the regular and heavy use of alcohol by suicide victims was found in 24.16% cases and nearly 32% were habituated to the occasional use of alcohol and other intoxicants.

Relief Measures

Death by suicide leaves the family not only grieving the unexpected death but also confused and lost by this haunting loss. On being asked about the type of help sought from government and non-governmental organisations, there were multiple opinions among respondents

Table 9: Social and Psychological Impact on Victim Families after the Suicide

Particulars	(Multiple Response)	
	Number	Percentage
No earning member in family	3,057	32.9
Family under depression	2,574	27.7
Discontinued education of children	1,041	11.2
Sold land	1,161	12.5
Marriage disrupted	316	3.4
Others*	790	8.5
No impact	762	8.2

* Others include financial crunch, sale of house, death of parents, sale of livestock, etc.
Source: Compiled by the authors.

Table 10: Use of Intoxicants by Suicide Victims

Particulars	Number	Percentage
Daily user	2,245	24.16
Occasional	2,950	31.75
Never	4,096	44.09
Total	9,291	100

Source: Compiled by the authors.

regarding relief measures (Table 11). Nearly 96% families were expecting some kind of financial assistance, 33% were looking forward to receiving a pension and 30% families hoped for free medical aid. Monetary and physical help for education, job and solutions for repayment of non-institutional debt were other expected supports from the government.

Table 11: Type of Help Sought from Government and Non-governmental Organisations by the Victims' Family
(Multiple Response)

Particulars	Number	Percentage
Direct financial assistance	8,891	95.7
Pension	3,029	32.6
Free medical support	2,815	30.3
Job for a family member	2,639	28.4
Waiver of institutional debt	2,546	27.4
Free education	2,406	25.9
Solution for non-institutional debt	1,923	20.7
Increase in old age pension	1,793	19.3
Restoring of mortgaged land	251	2.7
Others*	28	0.3

* Allied occupation, resolution of cases related to land, and so on.

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Policy Suggestions

The trend of suicide among farmers of Punjab is worrisome. It is urgent to pay attention to check the rising incidence of suicides. The following policy suggestions are made to mitigate the phenomenon of farmer suicides in the state:

First, the Punjab government has provided compensation of ₹3 lakh to the victim families who died by suicide between 2000 and 2010. But, the suicide cases between January 2011 and March 2013 were not considered for compensation. After March 2013, the state government had formulated a policy for addressing the issue of suicide. As per this policy, the compensation of ₹3 lakh, along with other measures, should be given to the victim families within the specific time period of the suicide. But, in many cases these families were deprived of this compensation due to lack of required documents, such as post-mortem report, credit record and so on. It is utmost essential to extend compensation to all suicide victim families who are under economic distress. Second, settlement of the debt, which is the main reason behind farmer suicides, demands immediate attention. The institutional loan amount which is around 43% of the total loans availed by the victim families

should be waived off. To settle the loans advanced by non-institutional sources, which is around 57% of the total loan amount, the "Scheme for Debt Swapping of Borrowers" should be made effective for converting the non-institutional debt into institutional debt. Further, it is suggested that the rate of interest on agricultural credit must be reduced. The functions and activities of non-institutional credit agencies should be regulated and monitored. The payment of farmers' produce should be made directly to the farmers, and not to the commission agents, so that the farmers come out of the bondage of commission agents (moneylenders). Third, crop failure is also one of the major reasons which forced the farmers to end their lives. Therefore, it is pertinent to provide suitable compensation to the farmers in the case of crop failure. As for a long-term solution, the farm profitability should be enhanced by mitigating production and marketing risks. For this purpose, the procurement of farm produce should be efficient and effective. Moreover, costs of cultivation should be reduced by providing farm inputs, such as seed, fertilisers, agrochemicals, and farm machinery at subsidised prices. This should be accompanied by strict checks on the delivery and quality of farm inputs. These farm input subsidies must also be extended to small farmers with a prime focus on conservation of natural resources. For this purpose, the awareness among farmers have to be created for a need-based use of resources/inputs so as to reduce the cost of cultivation and minimise adverse effects of their excessive use.

Next issue is related with heavy farm mechanisation which pushed the peasantry into debt. Many small farmers availed loans for purchasing tractors without its economic viability. As many as 77% of the total suicides were by small farmers. In Punjab, around one-quarter of the small farmers of the state own tractors, which makes their farming non-viable due to higher fixed costs and dis-economies of scale. Therefore, agro machinery service centres on a cooperative basis needs to be set up in every village in which small farmers must get priority for custom hiring of the machinery. Public health and education sectors need to be

strengthened by providing effective and efficient free services to the people in general and distressed families in particular. Likewise, some of the farmer suicides in the state were due to sociological and psychological reasons like drug addiction, family discord, and litigation. Therefore, a mass campaign should be launched to sensitise the rural masses on these issues.

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