

Farmers' Suicides in India: A Qualitative Study of Andhra Pradesh (AP) and Telangana States of India

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Abstract

Suicides by the farmers' is increasing in India. From 2005 to 2020, 319,598 farmers committed suicide and in states of AP and Telangana this number was 319,598 which is 28% of the total. It implies that more than one quarter of the total number of farmers' who committed suicide in the country were from Telangana and AP. Worldwide farming is considered as a high risk occupation for mental diseases. May be because of the nature of farming and the risk of natural calamities. The study aims to identify the factors that contribute to farmer suicides in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh (AP) and to propose preventive solutions for the problem. In this research in-depth interviews were done with the close relatives of the person who committed suicide and qualitative methodology is used. We find that the main causes of farmers suicides are economic and not the mental health of the farmers.

Keywords: Farmers suicides, mental health, poverty

INTRODUCTION

Worldwide farming is considered an occupation with a high risk of mental diseases and suicides.^[1] In India also farmers' suicides are very high and at the same time, farmers' protests are also increasing. The recent one to quote (Guha and Das, 2022) is the farmers' protest in India for the three farm laws which were passed by the present Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) government at the center for the reforms in the agricultural sector. The protest lasted for around one year and many farmers even lost their lives as well. Finally, the government had to repeal the farm laws.^[2]

From 2005 to 2020, 319,598 farmers and agricultural laborers committed suicides in India, and suicides in Telangana and AP was 89,496, which is 28% of the all India total. Even though there are chances of considerable underreporting of farmers' suicides,^[3] there are reports that state that the farmers need many documents to prove that there was suicide by a family member and most of the time the rural people do not have these documents. If they have taken a loan from a money lender does not give any documents, in the same way, they do not have documents for tenancy as well.^[4]

THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We conducted a qualitative study in the remote villages of Telangana and AP to explore the causes of farmers' suicides in these two states in particular and in India in general. In the present research, qualitative research methodology as described by Braun and Clarke, 2006 was followed.^[5]

The districts selected for the study are the Adilabad district in Telangana and the Nandyal District in AP. The details of the farmers who committed suicides were available with the District Collectors's office. From the collector's office, villages where the suicide rates were very high were selected. Most of the villages were very remote and not even connected with the pukka roads or metalled roads. In these villages, poverty was very high and the percentage of population of Scheduled castes and tribes was also quite high. We met the sarpanch/head of the

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village panchayat (local self-governing body in the village) of these villages and got the addresses of the surviving members of the farmer's family. The surviving members were interviewed to know the factors that led the farmer to commit suicide.

A qualitative methodology was used to analyze the data. In qualitative methodology, in-depth interviews are taken. Each interview took approximately 60 to 90 min on average. Interviews were transcribed and codes and themes were generated. In the first step, a demographic classification of the sample based on gender, education, caste, ownership of certain assets, etc., is done. The second stage was the examination and getting familiar with the data by continuously introspecting the filled-up questionnaires and a memo log for each response was maintained. These memos served to justify the questions to be removed from the initial questionnaire due to the uneasiness that the respondents felt. The third stage was the generation of initial codes and in the fourth stage themes and subthemes were generated.

DISCUSSION

The target population for the study is the close person of the farmer who committed suicide in the remote villages of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh in the year 2020. The demographics of the sample are given in Table 1.

We find from the table that in the sample we have only 18 females and 83 males. The difference is due to the important feature for inclusion in the sample was those who committed suicide in the district and the responses were taken from a close relative of the person. Another reason is the patriarchal

nature of Indian society, where the family head will give the responses for the survey questions rather than the spouse coming forward for the same.

Farmers' suicides by females are much less compared with males. Coming to the caste-wise distribution, we find that only three were from open category (OC) and all the remaining were from the lower castes. Maximum 43 from backward class (BC), followed by 38 from scheduled caste (SC), 17 from scheduled tribe (ST), and the remaining 3 from OC. Education-wise a large chunk of 49 farmers were illiterate, 10 studied till 6th standard, i.e. primary education, 23 had secondary education, 18 studied till graduation, and 1 had a Master's degree. Coming to their asset ownership, we find that 77 farmers did not have even a two-wheeler, 22 farmers families had one two-wheeler, and two had two-wheelers and only two families had a tractor, which is considered as major agricultural machinery.

From Table 2, we find that those farmers who committed suicide had mental health issues like they were not happy with their life, had depression, were very much worried, and not getting sleep at night. In addition, they had economic and social problems also like lack of sufficient income, indebtedness, loss of reputation, crop failure, etc., The percentage of people with health issues and family issues is very low. The total in the percentage column has some overlap because many of the respondents gave multiple factors for the suicides. Most of them reported a combination of mental health and economic problems.

From the in-depth interviews, we also know that most farmers had taken loans from multiple agencies and because of crop failure they were not able to repay the loan and then they were being pressurized by the banks and other lenders for loan repayment. Sometimes they borrow money from one agency to pay the debts (or just a few installments or interest) of other agencies. This is evident from excerpts from some of the interviews like Mr. Kompalli Narasaiah took a loan from bank for 20 lakhs to grow turmeric on his 10-acre land, when the crop failed, he had to take more loan from commission agents, friends, and relatives to at least pay interest on the bank loan and manage his household expenses. The loan amount accumulated and when he committed suicide it was 50 lakhs. He had his wife, three children, and father as his dependents. His wife and children are now working as maids in a nearby town and his father is waiting to sell the land and clear the debts.

Another farmer named Golli Maresh had 2 acres of land committed suicide when his cotton crop failed due to some insect attack. He had also taken crop loans from banks, then took loans from friends and relatives to manage family expenses. He attempted suicide once but failed again he tried a second time and died this time. He also has two daughters, a wife, and a mother whose condition is very bad now and they were complaining that they did not get any relief from any organization. They sold the land and are now working as agricultural laborers.

Table 1: Demographics of the sample

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Female	18	17.6
Male	83	81.4
Caste		
Scheduled Caste (SC)	38	37.3
Scheduled Tribe (ST)	17	16.7
Backward Caste (BC)	43	42.2
Open Category (OC)	3	2.9
Education		
Illiterate	49	48
Till 6 th	10	9.8
7-10	23	22.55
Degree	18	17.6
PG	1	1
No. of. two wheelers		
0	77	62.1
1	22	17.7
2	2	1.6
Tractors		
0	99	79.8
1	2	1.6

Source: Original

Table 2: Themes, Subthemes, and Codes

Themes	Subthemes	Codes	Frequency	Percentage
Behavioral Issues	Frustrated, worried, disinterested,	Not happy with the life, always worried for lack of income, lack of proper sleep, indifferent nature, easily getting upset, frustrated with life	83	82.18
Economic Issues	Poverty, indebtedness, crop loss	Lack of rain fall Drought No irrigation Stress because of crop failure Lack of sufficient income Lack of alternative income Indebtedness Loss of crop due to natural calamities Loss of reputation Stress for loan repayment Unemployment	91	90.10
Health Issues	Not keeping well	Cancer or any terminal disease Nagging health issues Suicidal tendencies AIDS	33	32.67
Family Issues	Family stressors	Wife left him Family problems Property dispute Dispute in the family Failure in love	14	13.86

Another farmer with two acres of land committed suicide because of crop failure, and the burden of family expenses. His children are now cultivating the land. He had depression and loss of sleep. His mother was also remaining sick and therefore expenses were high and had to take a loan of 2 lakhs.

From these interviews, we can understand that farmers in India are in distress and they have plenty of problems. The income from agriculture is very meagre and there is uncertainty of harvest. Sometimes there are floods, drought, or other times there is some insect attack or some disease which destroys the produce. Moreover, because of limited uncertain income, they are always under debt. They take crop loans and if the crop fails they take more loans to pay the earlier loan with interest and also to run their family. It has been found in earlier research^[6] that Indian bankers lack empathy. They motivate farmers to take loans to fulfill their priority sector targets and when farmers are unable to repay they pressurize them and force farmers to take more debt thus they are in a debt trap and when farmers realize this it is too late. Due to these economic problems, they get into depression, they get suicide ideation, and finally, they commit suicide. It has been found in the literature that agriculturalists are more prone to mental diseases, maybe because of exposure to certain chemicals used in farming or because of the constant stress that they have.

There are three sets of remedial measures. The first set is after a farmer has committed suicide and the second set is for the prevention of suicides by others. In fact, the second set is more important, but the first set cannot be ignored. The third set, which is actually long-term measure is the improvement in the agricultural sector and improvement in the incomes of the farmers.

In the first set comes measures like immediate monetary benefit to the victim's family since most of the suicides are directly or indirectly related to economic distress. This will provide immediate relief to the farmer's family. A moratorium on debt may be given and the rate of interest may be reduced or waived off. It is also suggested that cost-free skill training or education must be provided to kith and kin of the victim. Adult family members may be provided with suitable employment.

In the second set of remedial measures comes psychiatric treatment for those who are found to have suicidal tendencies or those vulnerable groups. May be the help of the village sarpanch (head of the panchayat/local body in the village) or others may be taken to identify those in such state or telephone helplines for the purpose must be created so that the neighbors, friends, or relatives can contact in case required. The awareness about the importance of mental health must be created in the villages. If the task is too big for the government, then it can take help from the NGOs and maybe some companies may also come forward as a part of their social responsibility. Public awareness about warning signs of suicidal tendencies of the person must be taken up by the government and psychiatrist must be available in at least every few villages if not in every village. The government can at least recruit some psychiatrists who will visit each village at least once a week. Government should take steps to reduce the stigma associated with mental health. According to World Health Organization (WHO), mental health promotion and protection involves creating an environment that promotes healthy living and encourages people to adopt healthy lifestyles. Mental health promotion will now receive more focus, with its inclusion into the Sustainable Development Goals."^[7]

The third set of remedial measures includes bringing certain structural changes in Indian Agriculture. Diversification of cropping patterns may also be taken up as a long-term measure. There is a need for increasing rural industrial activities like the processing of agricultural produce directly at the farm by the farmers. So that the farmer's income will increase. This was successfully done in Southeast Asian countries, especially Taiwan. The farmers' association bypasses the intermediaries successfully. There is a need for change in the organizational structure of production from the present individual small farmers to the big cooperative societies, which will also process the product and do marketing as well directly to the consumers thus eliminating middlemen in the system.^[8] The problem of rural credit also needs to be addressed. The dependence of farmers on money lenders has to be reduced. In the event of a sudden attack of pests and diseases, local governments should provide immediate relief measures through the extension wing. Crop insurance schemes also must be effective. It has been in operation for a long but did not provide a satisfactory safety net to the farmers. It is necessary that the crop insurance scheme is rationalized, and some of the present insurance schemes could be suitably merged or revised to help farmers overcome the distress situation. A good agricultural insurance scheme is much better than subsidizing inputs or providing farm loan waivers to the farmers.^[9] There is a need to develop low-input sustainable agricultural practices so that farmers do not fall into a debt trap. Farmers should also be provided information and guidance on sustainable agricultural practices to improve the farmers' income and their dependence on chemical fertilizers and pesticides must be reduced.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that the situation now is serious and it is high time for the government to take

action. If timely action is not taken then it will have dire consequences on the economy. In fact, the new generation is losing interest in the agriculture sector because of such events and they are migrating to urban areas and if this continues our food security will be at stake. Moreover, urban areas are also facing a large number of problems due to migration from rural areas and we are having the problem of unemployment and this will add to the existing unemployment. The farmers are entrepreneurs and the absence of safety nets should not crush this entrepreneurial spirit. Therefore, the state must come out with a strong safety net program for the farmers.

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Conflicts of interest

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