



**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Farmer Suicides in India with Reference to Telangana State: An Overview**

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Received: 9<sup>th</sup> April 2016, Revised: 10<sup>th</sup> May 2016, Accepted: 21<sup>st</sup> May 2016

**ABSTRACT**

*India is an agrarian country with around 48.9% of its people depending directly or indirectly upon agriculture. Nowadays the problem of farmers' suicides is one of the vital concerns that need to be addressed by the Government. Considering the paramount importance of this issue, the NCRB, for the first time, has collected detailed data on farmers' suicides. Since the causes of suicides of farmers are multiple, there is no single solution that can prevent such suicides. The prevention programmes need to be tailored considering the factors like age, sex, cause and setting. Undoubtedly, suicides are posing a major threat to the civil society. Combined intervention strategies with defined plan and programme of work are urgently required to reduce the burden of suicides secure the precious lives and to save the society from such unprecedented menace.*

**Key words:** Farmer' Suicide, Economy, Telangana State

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**INTRODUCTION**

Agriculture plays an important role in the economy of Telangana State, contributing about 28 per cent of the gross domestic products. More than 70 per cent of population is engaged in agriculture. Farmers suicides are no longer a feature of drought prone and economically backward districts. Even though suicides have existed since time immemorial, a scientific debate about the process of suicides began only during the last decade in India and three to four decades back in industrialized countries. India stands fourth in the rate of suicide in the world. Several relief measures are already available in the schemes sponsored by both the Government of India and the State Governments. The Telangana government has taken action to control the suicide The Crop Insurance Scheme jointly implemented by the State Government and the General Insurance rate by announcing a set of relief measures, which however have not been so far successful. Suicide is a momentary act of taking one's life due to personal or induced reasons. 'A World Health Organization (1968) has defined a suicidal act as a suicidal act eighth fatal outcome'. Suicidal acts with non fatal outcomes are labled by W.H.O. as "Attempted Suicide".

A study on farmers' suicides in Telangana was undertaken by AWARE, an NGO, to identify various factors that led farmers to commit suicide and to suggest possible solutions to avert such suicides in future. The farmers who committed suicides were mostly cotton growers. Out of 92 sample farmers surveyed, 89 per cent were cotton growers. The reasons attributed for suicides were mostly crop failure due to pests and use of defective pesticides. Only six per cent of the farmers were able to get technical advice from mass media and the major sources of technical advice were from private pesticide shop owners. The loan spent by the deceased farmers was on seeds, fertilizers and pesticide (89 per cent), digging bore well (6 per cent) and for marriages (3.5 per cent). The most common method adopted to commit suicide was consuming pesticide (90 per cent) followed by hanging (8 per cent) and drowning (2 per cent). According to P.V. Ramanna, Director of AWARE, almost half of the farmers died under 40 years of age.

**TOTAL NUMBER OF FARMERS**

Annual farmers' suicide incidence rate data on 100,000 farmers' basis depend on estimated total number of farmers for year. Estimates for total number of farmers in India vary widely. Some count the total number of cultivators, some include cultivators and agricultural laborers in their

definition of total farmers, while others include anyone engaged in any form of farming and agriculture activity. Estimates for total number of farmers in India, for 2011, accordingly range from 95.8 million (8%) to 263 million (22%) to 450 million (38%), out of a total population of over 1.2 billion. Others estimate the total number of farmers in India to be about 600 million (50% of total population). With about 14,000 suicides in 2011 by those engaged in farming and agricultural activities, the different estimates of total farmers has led to different suicide incidence rate estimates on per 100,000 farmers basis. Additionally, the reliability of official statistics has been questioned. K. Nagaraj suggests that official data may be overestimating the number of total farmers in India, and undercounting the total number of farmer suicides every year. Tom Brass, in contrast, suggests that official Census and Surveys in India systematically underestimate the total number of people engaged in agriculture in India.

Farmers include those who own and work on field (viz. cultivators) as well as those who employ/hire workers for field work/farming activities. It excludes agricultural labourers. A total of 5,650 farmers have committed suicides during 2014, accounting for 4.3% of total suicides victims in the country as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Incidence of Farmers' Suicides and Percentage Share to Total Suicides in the year, 2014

Total number of Farmers' Suicides	Total number of Farmers' Suicides	Percentage Share of Farmers' Suicides to Total Suicides [(Col.1/Col. 2)x100]
1,31,666	5,650	4.3%

A total of 5,178 male farmers and 472 female farmers have committed suicides, accounting for 91.7% and 8.4% of total farmers' suicides. 31.1%, 29.2% 14.1% and 11.0% of female farmers' suicides, were reported in Telangana (147 out of 472 suicides), Madhya Pradesh (138 suicides), Maharashtra (70 suicides) and Chhattisgarh (52 suicides) respectively.

A total of 2,568 farmers' suicides were reported in Maharashtra followed by 898 such suicides in Telangana and 826 suicides in Madhya Pradesh, accounting for 45.5%, 15.9% and 14.6% respectively of total farmer suicides during 2014. Chhattisgarh (443 suicides) and Karnataka (321 suicides) accounted for 7.8% and 5.7% respectively of the total farmer suicides reported in the country. These 5 States together accounted for 89.5% of the total farmer suicides (5,056 out of 5,650) reported in the country during 2014.

### INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

Farmer's suicide is a global phenomenon. Outside India, studies in Sri Lanka, USA, Canada, England and Australia have identified farming as a high stress profession that is associated with a higher suicide rate than the general population. This is particularly true among small scale farmers and after periods of economic distress. Fraser et al., similarly, after a review of 52 scholarly publications, conclude that farming populations in the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia, Canada and the United States have the highest rates of suicide of any industry and there is growing evidence that those involved in farming are at higher risk of developing mental health problems. Their review claims a wide range of reasons behind farmers' suicide globally including mental health issues, physical environment, family problems, economic stress and uncertainties. Significantly higher suicide rate among farmers than general population have been reported in developed countries such as the UK and the US.

In 2014, a Kollywood movie was released under the name Kaththi and the story revolves around a fictional tale about Kathiresan and Jeevanantham (both portrayed by Joseph Vijay) focuses on the issue of farmers committing suicide due to corporate encroachment.

The 2001 film *Lagaan* describes some of the pressures faced by Indian farmers and members of rural communities, and how the British Raj exacerbated those pressures. *Lagaan* won 44 awards and was nominated for an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film.

### CAUSES OF FARMER SUICIDES

Various reasons have been offered to explain why farmers commit suicide in India, including: floods, drought, debt, use of genetically modified seed, public health, usage of lower quantity of pesticides due to less investments produce a decreased yield and also government economic policies. There is no consensus on what the main causes might be but studies show suicide victims are motivated by more than one cause, on average three or more causes for committing suicide. Panagariya states, "farm-related reasons get cited only approximately 25 percent of the time as reasons for suicide" and "studies do consistently show greater debt burden and greater reliance on informal sources of credit" amongst farmers who commit suicide.

Reasons for farmers' suicides (in 2002)	Percentage of Suicides
<b>Failure of crops</b>	16.81
Other reasons (e.g. chit fund)	15.04
Family problems with spouse, others	13.27
Chronic illness	9.73
Marriage of daughters	5.31
Political affiliation	4.42
Property disputes	2.65
<b>Debt burden</b>	2.65
<b>Price crash</b>	2.65
Borrowing too much debts (e.g. for house construction)	2.65
Losses in non-farm activities	1.77
<b>Failure of bore wells</b>	0.88
Note: "Reasons given by close relatives and friends. Every case cited more than one reason."	

A study conducted in 2014, found that there are three specific characteristics associated with high risk farmers: "those that grow cash crops such as coffee and cotton; those with 'marginal' farms of less than one hectare; and those with debts of 300 Rupees or more." The study also found that the Indian states in which these three characteristics are most common had the highest suicide rates and also accounted for "almost 75% of the variability in state-level suicides."

A 2012 study did a regional survey on farmers' suicide in rural Vidarbha (Maharashtra) and applied a Smith's Saliency method to qualitatively rank the expressed causes among farming families who had lost someone to suicide. The expressed reasons in order of importance behind farmer suicides were – debt, alcohol addiction, environment, low produce prices, stress and family responsibilities, apathy, poor irrigation, increased cost of cultivation, private money lenders, use of chemical fertilizers and crop failure. In other words, debt to stress and family responsibilities were rated as significantly higher than fertilizers and crop failure. In a different study in the same region in 2006, indebtedness (87%) and deterioration in the economic status (74%) were found to be major risk factors for suicide.

Studies dated 2004 through 2006, identified several causes for farmers suicide, such as insufficient or risky credit systems, the difficulty of farming semi-arid regions, poor agricultural income, absence of alternative income opportunities, a downturn in the urban economy which forced non-farmers into farming, and the absence of suitable counseling services. In 2004, in response to a request from the All India Biodynamic and Organic Farming Association, the Mumbai High Court required the Tata Institute to produce a report on farmer suicides in Maharashtra, and the institute submitted its report in March 2005. The survey cited "government's lack of interest, the absence of a safety net for farmers, and lack of access to information related to agriculture as the chief causes for the desperate condition of farmers in the state."

Excessive use of chemical pesticides, erratic rainfall, heavy debt burden, and spurious seeds are taking a heavy toll on farmers in the perennially drought-hit Mahbubnagar district. As many as 20 farmers have committed suicide in the district in the last three months. They have taken the desperate step unable to bear the losses due to frequent crop failures or clear the mounting agricultural debts. Insufficient loan advances by banks and high interest rates collected by private moneylenders too have played their part in the suicides.

District officials refuse to admit the increasing instances of farm suicides, but don't deny that Mahbubnagar district is "vulnerable" thanks to a combination of factors ranging from high consumption of pesticides and fertilisers to unpredictable climatic conditions. The authorities wait the post-mortem reports for disbursement of compensation. "Farmers here spray pesticides in quantities more than required. They thus not only spend more money on pesticides, but end up in losses or get low yield as excessive spraying of chemicals change the texture of the soil".

### RESPONSES TO FARMERS' SUICIDES

The government appointed a number of inquiries to look into the causes of farmers' suicide and farm related distress in general. Krishak Ayog (National Farmer Commission) visited all suicide prone farming regions of India, then in 2006 published three reports with its recommendations. Subsequently former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Vidarbha in 2006 and promised a package of ₹110 billion (about \$2.4 billion). The families of farmers who had committed suicide were also offered an *ex gratia* grant of ₹100,000 (US\$1,500) by the government, though this amount was changed several times.

#### Effectiveness of government response

The government's response and relief packages have generally been ineffective, misdirected and flawed, states Surinder Sud. It has focused on credit and loan, rather than income, productivity and farmer prosperity. Assistance in paying off outstanding principal and interest helps the money lenders, but has failed to create reliable and good sources of income for the farmer going forward. The usurious moneylenders continue to offer loans at interest rates between 24 and 50 percent, while income generating potential of the land the farmer works on has remained low and subject to weather conditions. Sud states that the government has failed to understand that debt relief just postpones the problem and a more lasting answer to farmer distress can only come from reliable income sources, higher crop yields per hectare, irrigation and other infrastructure security. Golait, in a Reserve Bank of India paper, acknowledged the positive role of crop diversification initiative announced in government's response to reports of farmer suicides. Golait added, "Indian agriculture still suffers from: i) poor productivity, ii) falling water levels, iii) expensive credit, iv) a distorted market, v) many middlemen and intermediaries who increase cost but do not add much value, vi) laws that stifle private investment, vii) controlled prices, viii) poor infrastructure, and ix) inappropriate research. Thus the approach with mere emphasis on credit in isolation from the above factors will not help agriculture". Furthermore, recommended Golait, a more pro-active role in creating and maintaining reliable irrigation and other agriculture infrastructure is necessary to address farmer distress in India.

### CONCLUSION

Since the causes of suicides are multiple, there is no single solution that can prevent such suicides. The prevention programmes need to be tailored considering the factors like age, sex, cause and setting. Undoubtedly, suicides are posing a major threat to the civil society. Many younger people out of stress and strain in their regular life and some of them due to incited problems are committing suicide. The farmers and rural artisans due to debt burden and social problems are taking the route of suicide. These have to be prevented with top most priority. This has become grave concern to the policy makers, administration, researchers and civil society organizations. Combined intervention strategies with defined plan and programme of work are urgently required to reduce the burden of suicides secure the precious lives and to save the society from such unprecedented menace.

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**How to cite this article:**

Ailaiah K. and Raghu S. (2016): Farmer Suicides in India with Reference to Telangana State: An Overview. Annals of Education, Vol. 2[3]: Sept., 2016: 27-31.