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INEQUALITY AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

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NIAS Policy Brief

Farmers' suicides in India

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With three lakh farmers committing suicide over the two decades between 1995 and 2014, this phenomenon has emerged as a symbol of the crisis in Indian agriculture. There have been a large number of academic efforts to understand farmers' suicides in great depth, but they have tended to be divided by the regions they have studied, the methods they have used, and the questions they have raised, with most remaining loyal to their disciplines and ideologies. There have been fewer attempts to piece together a picture that is both comprehensive and sensitive to the complexity of the processes that lead to farmers' suicides. The Inequality and Human Development Programme at the National Institute of Advanced Studies has tried to develop such a larger picture. The study, supported by Tata Consultancy Services and involving a multidisciplinary team of researchers, linked theory to the empirical picture, using mixed methods from ethnography to primary data, and secondary data.

The question

The main questions that were sought to be answered were: What are the processes that generate the high rates of farmers' suicides in India? Can they be traced to specific socio-economic transformations taking place in rural India? And what are the interventions that will help ease the crisis?

The issue

The focus of policy responses to farmers' suicides must vary depending on whether it is just a part of a larger crisis of suicides in India or is more closely connected to processes of agrarian and rural transformation. The high rates of suicides in India may suggest that the problem is not specific to farmers. When mapping suicides across the world the World Health Organization had, for 2016, placed India in the highest category where age standardized suicide rates were 15 or more per lakh population. The case for focusing on suicides as a whole and not just those farmers would appear to be further strengthened by the fact that for the country as a whole, the suicide rates of farmers are, for most years, lower than that of non-farmers.

This overall picture, however, hides a much grimmer farm reality. The two decades between 1995 and 2014 (both years included) have seen farmers in several states being much more prone to commit suicide than non-farmers. Kerala found in this period nearly three times as many farmers' suicides as those of non-farmers. And in these states the problem can persist over a number of years. Indeed, we can use the number of years in this twenty-year period when a state had more farmers' suicides than those of non-farmers, as an indicator of the persistence of the crisis. This allows

us to classify states into five levels of declining severity of farmers' suicides: chronic, acute, less acute, prone, and less prone. This classification is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Categorisation of states by the persistence of the severity of farmers' suicide, 1995-2014	
Chronic (20)	Kerala
Very Acute (11-19)	Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh
Acute (5-10)	Chhattisgarh, Goa, Karnataka, Jammu & Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, Sikkim, Jharkhand
Prone (1-4)	Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Haryana, Meghalaya, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Nagaland
Less prone (0)	Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Gujarat, Manipur, Odisha, Punjab, Tripura

The regional variation in the patterns of farmers' suicides must be seen in the context of different patterns of rural transformation. The main thrust for this transformation may emerge from a single source: the pressures on agriculture that arise from issues of scale. As farms have become smaller and less viable farmers have sought other opportunities. The extent and nature of these opportunities, however, vary across India. In parts of the country where there is dispersed non-farm growth, the next generation in farming families can tap non-farm opportunities while continuing to live in the village. In regions where such opportunities are not locally available, those seeking to move out of agriculture have to migrate permanently to urban centres. This migration involves an economic and social cost. In regions of extreme poverty where workers do not have the ability to meet these costs they come up with more innovative arrangements, including one or two members of a family working in cities while the rest of the family remains in the village. When these options also do not exist, the workers could fall back on the basic shelter of their homes in villages, or migrate to other villages where larger modern farms may be emerging. When exploring the impact of these varied forms of rural transformation on farmers' suicides, there is much to be gained by going back to Durkheim's emphasis on too much, or too little, integration as well as too much, or too little, regulation, as causing suicides. In negotiating these uncharted empirical waters, the study first sought insights from ethnographic studies of two villages in the two states – Kerala and Maharashtra – which top the ranking presented in Table 1; one dominated by agricultural labour suicides and the other by cultivator suicides. The consistent argument that emerged from these insights were then tested with nationwide secondary data.

The findings

The pressures that emerged from excessive integration were best seen in the functioning of the family. In the Kerala village, as the pressure to move out of agriculture

mounted, families prioritized getting their daughters married to those who worked outside this sector. In order to do so, they typically had to pay higher dowries and move into better-built houses so as to give the impression of a higher economic status. The loans they took to meet these demands were far greater than what the older agricultural labourers could realistically expect to repay. Yet some of the heads of agricultural labour families were so deeply integrated into the social system, and the demands of a socially accepted marriage, that they did not always stop short of taking loans they could not repay. This excessive integration added an altruistic motive to agricultural labour suicides.

The tendency among cultivators to commit suicide was from the other end of the integration spectrum. As farmers tried to retain their status in the rural hierarchy at a time of great change, they were tempted to take greater investment risks. Several farmers in the Maharashtra village had taken loans to invest in activities that would take them out of their middle-farmer status and enter the ranks of those who ran large modern farms. The repayment of these loans was vulnerable to unexpected slumps in yield or price. As conditions turned adverse, suicide was sometimes seen as the only option. The widespread nature of this tendency was reflected in the fact that the Suicide Mortality Rate Ratio of farmers had a statistically significant negative relationship with price and yield of the main crop in a region.

The tendency towards unviable borrowing was aided by a unique mix of too much and too little regulation generated by the interaction between formal and informal regulation. Formal regulation typically consists of a clearly defined set of rules that are consistent with the rule of law. The practice of the state need not always be consistent with the rules. Some rules can be bypassed to favour a person or a group. Other individuals and groups can be prevented from accessing formal rules that would protect their interests. These practices generate an alternative set of norms that are a mix of the formal and the informal; norms that the farmer has to deal with. In the Kerala village the prominent political place for the cooperative bank ensured a need for it to provide



The state of the house of a farmer who committed suicide.

patronage. This contributed to the granting of loans that the borrower could not realistically be expected to repay. At the same time, the survival of the bank demanded that loans be repaid. This led to a dichotomous approach to agricultural labour. On the one hand, there was the patronage involved in providing the loan, while on the other hand, there was a strict demand for repayment. The pressures for repayment of loans they could not repay were intense enough to force agricultural labour to commit suicide.

The integration-cum-regulation trap works through indebtedness. The mix of the political and the economic in cooperative banks makes them a major driver for farmers' suicides. Thus on a countrywide scale, an increase in the proportion of cooperative bank loans to total loans from the formal sector causes a statistically significant increase in the Suicide Mortality Rate Ratio of farmers. Ironically, the much maligned informal lending systems can in some cases have a calming effect. Traders, who typically provide both consumption and production loans on the basis of expectations of a future crop, can help ease the pressures of a sharp drop in yield and price. In fact, the greater the share of loans from traders in informal borrowing, the less the suicide mortality rate ratio of farmers.

The very need to borrow does vary across the underlying processes of rural transformation. The immediate effect of the pressures on cultivators – leading to their either becoming agricultural labour or leaving agriculture altogether – is a decline in the ratio of cultivators to agricultural labour. Much of this pressure falls on agricultural labour who find it more difficult to find work both because of the increase in their numbers as well as a lower demand for their work with fewer landowners cultivating their land. Thus as the cultivator-agricultural labour ratio declines, the suicide mortality rate ratio of agricultural labour rises.

The process of moving out of agriculture is also enabled by the proximity of urban opportunities which can be accessed by cultivators as well as agricultural labour. Thus the rise in the share of non-farm workers to total workers leads to a statistically significant decline in the Suicide Mortality Rate Ratios of both cultivators and agricultural labour.

When non-farm jobs are not accessible while residing in the village, workers seek to migrate in search of employment elsewhere. This migration begins tentatively with the man going in search of urban opportunities and sometimes leaving the cultivation of whatever land is left to the women of the household, thereby causing an increase in the ratio of female to male cultivators. The male farmers who are left behind hoping for an urban opportunity can find the wait deeply frustrating. The lower proportion of workers to total population, which is accompanied by this frustration, can push both farmers and agricultural labour to suicide. Thus



The widow of a farmer who took a loan he could not repay for his daughter's wedding. He committed suicide on the 23rd day of her wedding.

the Suicide Mortality Rate Ratio of farmers is negatively related to the proportion of workers to total population and positively related to the ratio of female to male cultivators.

The limited opportunities for permanent migration can leave the workers being unemployed for extended periods of time. These conditions of large scale unemployment are usually associated with extensive poverty. This poverty ensures expectations are very low, and correspondingly there is little effort to borrow to chase unrealistic dreams. As a result, the greater the proportion of marginal workers the lower is the tendency to commit suicide. This brings to life Durkheim's words from more than a century ago: "What proves still more conclusively that economic distress does not have the aggravating influence often attributed to it, is that it tends rather to produce the opposite effect."

Workers who cannot find non-farm work may finally return to whatever they can find in agriculture. This further reduces the cultivator-agricultural labour ratio and increases the pressures that go with it. Large farmers are better equipped to survive these pressures, and even modernize their farming. But this could leave middle farmers behind, sometimes forcing them to suicide.

The implications

Arguably the most significant implication of this explanation of farmers' suicides in India is that the problem is not an agrarian one alone. The extent of the pressure on farmers at a time when they are seeking to move out of agriculture is dependent not just on the agrarian economy but also on the opportunities non-farm activities can provide. When these opportunities are in abundance the pain of the movement out of agriculture can be eased.

The explanation also emphasises the divergent influences of aspirations and poverty on farmers' suicides. Aspirations, based on the need to keep up with those benefitting from rural transformation, can lead to economically unsustainable

borrowing and the resultant pressure to commit suicide. In contrast, in conditions of widespread poverty farmers' have, in Arjun Appadurai's terms, a limited capacity to aspire. This results in fewer failed aspirations and hence in lower suicide rates.

Equally significantly, the interaction between the formal and the informal can generate new practices of regulation. These practices can both ease the access to credit and generate harsh measures to force repayment at times when farmers are particularly vulnerable. And finally, the variations in prices and yields act as triggers that set off the final processes that take farmers over the precipice.

The interventions

This explanation of farmers' suicides demands at least four major interventions.

1. The dispersal of industries can offer options other than suicide for farmers who have been pushed over the brink by agrarian change. A major contribution to a reduction in farmers' suicides could lie outside agriculture, in an effort to reduce regional inequalities in industrial development.
2. Effective interventions to bring about social change, particularly the need for dowries, can reduce the pressures on farmers in times of rural transformation. This reduction in pressure would have its impact particularly on the suicides of agricultural labour.

3. There is a need for a shift in focus from the rules governing formal rural lending to the practices that have emerged on the ground. It must be recognised that unviable lending practices are often the norm. The emphasis has to be on controlling the practice rather than merely looking at conforming to rules that may not be effective.
4. Farmers' vulnerability to price variations would be substantially lower if they had an idea when they sow of what the prices would be at the time of harvest. This would require effective forward markets that will guarantee farmers, at the beginning of the agricultural season, prices that will be paid at the time of harvest.

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