

Agrarian Crisis and Agricultural Labourer Suicides in Punjab

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Punjab's economy is engulfed in a serious agrarian crisis. The capitalisation of agricultural production processes has squeezed employment opportunities and wage rates in the farm sector. The agrarian crisis in the state has pushed the agricultural labourers towards low earnings and debt traps, which have led them towards death by suicide. Based on a door-to-door and village-to-village survey of 2,400 villages falling in the jurisdiction of six districts of Punjab, the present study reveals that 7,303 agricultural labourers died by suicide in the state during 2000–18. The financial compensation, debt waiver, provision of healthcare and education of victim families along with safeguarding of legal entitlements regarding wage enhancements and land rights, and agro-industrialisation are main policy measures for addressing the act of suicide by agricultural labourers.

India is an agrarian economy as over half of the total workforce of 48.2 crore is engaged in agriculture. Of the total agricultural workers of 26.3 crore in the country, over 45% are cultivators and the remaining around 55% are agricultural labourers (GoI 2011). Despite being a noteworthy size of workers and population of agricultural labourers, their socio-economic conditions have deteriorated over time and have reached a level that raises alarm. Victims of dire economic hardships, a large proportion of them are subject to misery; subsequently, many are ending up taking their own lives. During the last two decades, more than 3.50 lakh farmers died by suicide in India. This issue has often been discussed and debated on various platforms, but unfortunately, agricultural labourers' plight has been ignored for long. For instance, the data of suicides of this stratum of the country was not published and available till 2013. In India 6,750 agricultural labourers died by suicide in 2014, which declined to 4,595 in 2015 and increased to 5,019 in 2016. However, this number further declined to 4,324 in 2019 (NCRB 2020: 237). The phenomenon of rural suicides is more prevalent in the green revolution belt of the country. All the so-called agriculturally developed states, namely Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Punjab, are the worst-hit areas. The extent of socio-economic sufferings of agricultural labourers in these states has reached a critical phase. So much so, the green revolution has been arguably considered to be responsible for adversities among the rural working class.

In Punjab, out of total workforce of 99 lakh, over one-third is engaged in agriculture either as cultivators or agricultural labourers, which is much lower than that for India as a whole (54.6%). Among the total agricultural workforce of 35 lakh in the state, 15 lakh (43%) are agricultural labourers. Around two-thirds of these agricultural labourers belong to the Scheduled Caste (SC) category (GoI 2011), which is considered as the lowest in the caste hierarchy in the state. The mechanisation of agriculture, though enhanced crop productivity, reduced the work opportunities in the farm sector, consequently generated surplus labour. As a result, the problems of unemployment, underemployment and low labour productivity has grown in the agricultural sector.

The capitalisation of farm production processes in Punjab not only causes employment constraints but tends to reduce the wage rates in the rural economy. This process has pushed thousands of agricultural labourers towards low earnings and poor living conditions. A mismatch of expenditure and

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income, and the resultant debt trap (Chaudhary 2019: 113), has led to an awful trend of suicides in the state. Despite the fact that large number of agricultural labourers died by suicide in the state along with the deplorable number of farmer suicides, the focus of public discourse highlights the plight of the farmers alone. Unfortunately, the situation has been promulgated other way round and has trivialised the suicide phenomenon among agricultural labourers. It is propagated that agricultural labourers who do not have any means of production, except labour power, are not prone to suicide. These very reasons necessitated a systematic study for probing the plight of agricultural labourers. Against this backdrop the present study was undertaken to examine the magnitude of agricultural labourer suicides and the reasons responsible for these suicides, along with its impact on victim families in Punjab.

Approach of the Study

The present paper is based on a project primarily sponsored by the Government of Punjab to assess the magnitude of agricultural labourer suicides in Punjab. On the basis of a door-to-door and village-to-village survey of 2,400 villages falling in the jurisdiction of six districts of Punjab, namely Barnala, Bathinda, Ludhiana, Mansa, Moga and Sangrur, the study was carried out to examine all the labourer suicide cases that occurred during 2000–18 (Singh et al 2020).

Every village was visited repeatedly to cover all the cases. A list of all the suicide cases was prepared with the help of the sarpanch, panchayat members and chowkidar of the village. The data were collected from family members of all the suicide victims with personal interviews through a pre-tested schedule to analyse the exact cause of suicide and assess various dimensions of the crisis of the family at the time of suicide along with the aftermath on the victim family.

Genesis of the Agrarian Crisis

The capitalistic development model initiated in mid-1960s in Punjab linked the farm inputs and farm produce with the market economy. Subsequently, the subsistent economy transformed into a commercialised one. Initially, farm mechanisation led to an increase in labour-intensive shifts in the crop mix. As a result, cropping intensity, input-use efficiency and employment in farm sector increased. The agricultural sector was booming till early 1980s due to increase in the productivity of major crops, consequently the farm profitability enhanced. However, after mid-1980s, mechanisation of almost all the farm operations, particularly in wheat and paddy crops, and large-scale use of chemicals, especially weedicides and herbicides, displaced the farm labour (Sidhu and Singh 2004: 4133). As a result, the work availability in the farm sector reduced which pushed the permanent labourer towards casual wage labourer. Moreover, the influx of migrant labour from other states, especially Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, etc, during this period reduced work opportunities for local agricultural labourers and adversely affected the wage rates in the agrarian economy.

So far as new resources of growth strategy for developing countries is concerned, Mellor (1976) emphasised that the main impetus to rural non-farm employment growth generally comes from the dominant rural economic sector, namely agriculture. In the same way, the transformation theory given by Lewis (1954) revealed that the shift of labour from agriculture to industry is inevitable with the increase in capitalisation in agriculture. However, in India, though capitalisation of agriculture did lead to displacement of labour from agriculture, this displaced labour could not be accommodated in other sectors with sustained and rewarding livelihood opportunities (Dutta 2019: 36). Likewise, the nucleus of the present model of development of the Punjab economy is such that it has been unable to exhibit developmental transition of human resource, according to which the surplus labour from agricultural sector could be pulled towards secondary or tertiary sector with worthwhile living conditions. The demand for labour in agriculture declined by 12% from 479 million person days in 1983–84 to 421 million person days in 2000–01 (Sidhu and Singh 2004: 4134). The surplus labour was forced to hire out their labour in other sectors. **Unlike the development-oriented transition (pull type), much of the labour movement from the agricultural sector to the non-farm sector is of crisis-led transition (push-type) due to low wages and non-availability of work in the farm sector.** In Punjab, there were around 10 lakh farm families, out of which 5 lakh were small landholders who operate up to 2 hectares of land. Out of these small farmers, about 2 lakh farmers left the occupation of farming during 1991–2000 (Singh and Bhogal 2014: 96). Unfortunately, as much as 28% of them ended up joining the pool of wage labourers (Singh and Bhogal 2014: 99). The existing pool of labourers in the economy was further increased by the section of the surplus labour that was being pushed out of the agricultural sector.

The 1990s had a profound effect on the economy of the state. The policies of liberalisation and globalisation severely hit the agricultural sector by the linking of farm produce prices to those in the global market. During this period, the reduced farm subsidies, over-mechanisation and increased cost of production squeezed the farm returns. Moreover, the industrial sector which is under the threat of economic viability has proved to be incapable of absorbing the surplus rural labour. The micro, small and medium enterprises in the state, which are largely labour-intensive, have been facing viability issues. The gravity of this viability and survival issues can be understood from the fact that around 19,000 industrial units were shut down in Punjab from 2007 to 2015 as these units became unsustainable (Singh and Bhogal 2017: 9). As a consequence, the work opportunities and real wages in agricultural sector were depreciated that pushed the agricultural labourers towards the stage of low earnings. Further, neo-liberalism has pushed the subsidised social sector—healthcare and education—under the private domain; resultantly these expensive services became out of reach for the working class. Given the fact that their survival was already constrained by meagre earnings and expensive social necessities, this weaker section of the society

has become even more miserable and distressed. Such a scenario led them to borrow money from informal sources of finance of which landlords were the prime lenders. This process pushed them towards further deprivation and indebtedness. As a ripple effect, this underprivileged stratum of society has become economically distressed and psychologically depressed and ultimately reached a critical stage which forced them to end their lives.

Magnitude of Agricultural Labourer Suicides

The phenomenon of death by suicide of agricultural labourers as a trend prevailed in Punjab ever since the mid-1980s, while the crisis phase of the economy just started. As much as 7,303 suicides of agricultural labourers were recorded in the study areas during 2000–18 (Table 1). Out of these suicide cases, around 79% happened because of the heavy debt burden on the labourer families, while the remaining 21% suicides occurred due to other socio-economic factors. The trend of number of suicide cases reveals the persistence and the likelihood of the future occurrence level of this tragic phenomenon. The suicides of agricultural labourer exhibited an irregular trend across the study period and varied between 230 and 501 cases in Punjab. Overall, around 79% agricultural labour suicides occurred due to heavy debt burden. Over the years, number of suicides due to debt exhibited an increasing trend and was the highest at 94% in 2014. The total number of agricultural labourer suicides (230) and debt-related suicide cases were the lowest (202) in 2016, which may be the outcome of debt-waiver announcement made in 2016 by the ruling Congress party in its election manifesto of Punjab legislative assembly. But this debt-waiver announcement remained an unfulfilled promise. Unfortunately, the number of suicide cases increased to 303 in 2017 and further to 392 in 2018. In a way, the proportion

Table 1: Magnitude and Trend of Agricultural Labourer Suicides Due to Debt and Non-debt Reasons in Punjab

Year	Debt-related Suicides	Non-debt-related Suicides	Total
2000	247 (71.80)	97 (28.20)	344 (100)
2001	210 (69.77)	91 (30.23)	301 (100)
2002	224 (69.35)	99 (30.65)	323 (100)
2003	228 (64.96)	123 (35.04)	351 (100)
2004	221 (68.21)	103 (31.79)	324 (100)
2005	209 (67.42)	101 (32.58)	310 (100)
2006	266 (63.79)	151 (36.21)	417 (100)
2007	290 (74.94)	97 (25.06)	387 (100)
2008	348 (69.46)	153 (30.54)	501 (100)
2009	363 (77.73)	104 (22.27)	467 (100)
2010	385 (79.06)	102 (20.94)	487 (100)
2011	400 (84.75)	72 (15.25)	472 (100)
2012	385 (90.16)	42 (9.84)	427 (100)
2013	410 (90.31)	44 (9.69)	454 (100)
2014	388 (93.72)	26 (6.28)	414 (100)
2015	366 (91.73)	33 (8.27)	399 (100)
2016	202 (87.83)	28 (12.17)	230 (100)
2017	265 (87.46)	38 (12.54)	303 (100)
2018	358 (91.33)	34 (8.67)	392 (100)
Total	5,765 (78.94)	1,538 (21.06)	7,303 (100)

Figures in the parenthesis are percentages.

Source: Singh et al (2020).

of debt-related agricultural labourer suicide cases has followed a rising trend over time.

District-wise Suicides and HDI

The magnitude of agricultural labourer suicides varied across the districts of the state. Out of a total of 7,303 suicidal death cases, 5,765 suicides occurred due to indebtedness and the remaining 1,538 happened due to non-economic factors, mainly family dispute, marital discord, economic hardship, illness, drug addiction (Table 2). Suicide mortality—estimated as number of suicides per lakh workers—was the highest in Sangrur district (20.80) followed by Barnala district (19.05) and Mansa district (18.62). Ludhiana and Moga districts have low suicide mortality, at 6.50 and 8.73 suicides per lakh workers, respectively. The proportion of debt-related suicide cases was the highest (90.17) in Barnala district and the lowest in Ludhiana district (56.52). As per the human development index (HDI) in 2001, Ludhiana district was placed at the top, whereas the Mansa and Sangrur districts positioned at the bottom in Punjab (GoP 2004: 7–8). However, the agricultural labourer suicide cases were the lowest in Ludhiana district and the highest in Sangrur, closely followed by Mansa district. This reveals that the proportion of debt-related suicides is directly related with the level of development of the district.

Table 2: District-wise Number of Agricultural Labourer Suicides Due to Debt and Non-debt Reasons in Punjab

District	Debt-related Suicides	Non-debt-related Suicides	Total Suicides	Agricultural Labourers	Suicide Mortality per Lakh Workers	HDI
Barnala	697 (90.17)	76 (9.83)	773 (100)	40,460	19.05	0.654
Bathinda	1,250 (79.47)	323 (20.53)	1,573 (100)	1,28,382	12.25	0.674
Ludhiana	364 (56.52)	280 (43.48)	644 (100)	98,646	6.50	0.761
Mansa	1,420 (84.37)	263 (15.63)	1,683 (100)	90,367	18.62	0.633
Moga	477 (66.25)	243 (33.75)	720 (100)	82,397	8.73	0.683
Sangrur	1,557 (81.52)	353 (18.48)	1,910 (100)	91,799	20.80	0.654
Total	5,765 (78.94)	1,538 (21.06)	7,303 (100)	5,32,051	13.72	–

Figures in the parenthesis are percentages.

Source: Singh et al (2020).

Caste, Intensity and Mode of Suicide

Generally, agricultural labourers were placed quite low in the caste hierarchy. Table 3 reveals that around 83% of suicide victims belonged to SC category and 8.76% belonged to the backward class (BC). Contrary to the general perception that the people who belong to upper (general) castes do not join the agricultural labour market, it was found that around 9% of victims belonged to upper castes. The majority of these victims were farmers before

Table 3: Caste and Type of Residence of Agricultural Labourer Suicide Victim Families in Punjab

Particulars	Number	Percentage
Caste		
General	631	8.64
BC	640	8.76
SC	6,032	82.60
Type of residence		
Katcha	1,728	23.66
Semi-pakka	5,157	70.62
Pakka	418	5.72
Overall	7,303	100.00

Source: Singh et al (2020).

they became agricultural labourers. As per the sociocultural norms of the Punjabi society, the farmer—after losing land—seldom do work on the farms of others as a wage labour, they rather preferred to die by suicide to fight despondency. However, such norms lay faded as the poorest of farmers are joining agricultural labour market. The situation was equally grim on the housing front, only 6% of suicide victim families were residing in *pakka* (brick-made) houses and the remaining 94% resided in *katcha* or semi-*pakka* houses. Thereby, the majority of the victim families belong to a lower caste strata and live in semi-pakka houses.

Sadly, the spate of suicide amongst agricultural labourers was not limited to a single family member. In many families, the trend was more ghastly, wherein two or more persons died by suicide. Over 96% families were victims of a single suicide (Table 4). However, in 238 families (3.4%), two persons per family died by suicide. The intensity of the suicide can be observed from the fact that in 30 families, three persons each ended their lives. The economic distress was deep rooted to the extent that three families had four or more suicide cases. Thus, the glory of the green revolution belt of the country failed to trace these grieving families.

People who die by suicide use different means like consuming poison, hanging, drowning, etc. As many as 4,809 persons (65.85% of the total victims) consumed pesticide, especially rodenticide and celphos to kill themselves (Table 5), as these poisons—a farm input—were easily available in every household. Other methods used by victims to end their lives were hanging (19.64%), jumping before a train (5.36%) and jumping into a well/canal (5%). There were 4.16% suicide cases in which the deceased used various other ways, such as electrocution, jumping from a roof, self-immolation and cutting of major blood vessels.

Causes of Suicide

Suicide is a complex phenomenon which is a result of social, economic and psychological factors, and combinations thereof. Many psychologists advocated that the majority of persons who took their own lives were in a depressed state of mind; but Durkheim (1951) emphasised that the force which determines the suicide is not a psychological but a social one. The present study tried to explore all the intriguing factors that compelled an individual to end one's life. As much as around 79% suicides

happened due to indebtedness as a primary reason (Table 6). Domestic disputes emerged as the second most common reason accounted for 31% of agricultural labourer suicides. Many agricultural labourers were unable to avail credit due to minimal repayment capacity and unavailability of assets to be served as collaterals. Such situations are extreme cases of economic distress, even worse than that suicides influenced by indebtedness. Around 19% of the total suicides happened due to economic hardship.

Prolonged illness appeared as another dominant reason for suicide as about 15% of victims ended their lives due to this reason. Overdosing of intoxicants was reported as cause of suicide in 2.35% cases. There were also cases where some tenant-turned agricultural labourers leased in land for supplementing their meagre incomes. But it turned bitter in the case of crop failure or low crop productivity, which made them unable to meet operating costs or land rent. Such a situation pushed 0.14% of the labourers towards self-destruction. Due to low levels of income, agricultural labourers were resource-deficit to perform the necessary socio-religious ceremonies. In few cases (0.27%) they had to die by suicide due to insufficient economic capacity to solemnise even simple wedding ceremonies of their children and customary religious rites in the case of death of their family members.

Triggering Factors for Suicides

Although many persistent factors led the family towards severe distress but some triggering factors appear to be responsible for the spontaneous act of self-killing. Notably, in 31% cases domestic disputes and discords in family happened immediately before suicide (Table 7). About 20% victims were pushed towards suicide due to harassment by lenders to return the borrowed money. Various other incidents, including dire financial crunch, previous suicide in the family, prolonged illness, drug overdose, etc. were identified as cause of suicide in about 9% of the cases. However, about 39% cases were not induced by any immediate incident.

Income and Indebtedness of Victim Family

In Punjab, an agricultural labourer victim family has an average earning of ₹62,188 per annum (Table 8, p 53). By profession, the major source of these families was wage labour as around 92% of the total income was earned from hiring-out labour in farm and non-farm sectors. Sources like services,

Table 4: Intensity of Agricultural Labourer Suicides in a Family in Punjab

No of Suicides in a Family	No of Suicides	No of Victim Families	Percentage of Victim Families
One member	6,722	6,722	96.13
Two members	476	238	3.40
Three members	90	30	0.43
Four and more members	15	3	0.04
Total	7,303	6,993	100.00

Source: Singh et al (2020).

Table 5: Modes of Suicide Followed by Victims in Punjab

Mode of Suicide	Number of Suicides	Percentage
Consuming pesticides	4,809	65.85
Hanging themselves	1,434	19.64
Jumping before the train	391	5.35
Jumping in the wells/canals	365	5.00
Others*	304	4.16
Total	7,303	100.00

* Others include electrocution, jumping from roof, self-immolation and cutting of major blood vessel.

Source: Singh et al (2020).

Table 6: Reasons of Death by Suicides of Victims in Punjab

(Multiple response)		
Reason of Suicide	Number	Percentage
Indebtedness	5,765	78.94
Domestic dispute	2,264	31.00
Economic hardship	1,369	18.75
Prolonged illness	1,058	14.49
Drug addiction	172	2.35
High expenditure on socioreligious ceremonies	20	0.27
Loss from leased-in land	10	0.14

Source: Singh et al (2020).

Table 7: Incidents Happened Prior to Suicide in Victim Families in Punjab

Triggering/Immediate Factor	Number	Percentage
Domestic dispute	2,264	31.00
Pressurised/harassed by lenders	1,442	19.75
Dire financial crunch	82	1.12
Suicide in family/illness/drugs, etc	649	8.89
No immediate incident happened	2,866	39.24
Total	7,303	100.00

Source: Singh et al (2020).

dairying and pension contributed to the total family income as 4.48%, 1.65% and 0.29%, respectively. The work performed by labourers under the much propagated Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) contributed just 0.04% to the incomes of the victim families. Other sources like sale of assets and remittances also contributed (1.88%) to enhance the total income of these families.

Agricultural labour suicide victim families in Punjab were reeling under the debt burden of ₹99,579 (Table 9). This debt amount was almost 30% higher than the debt burden on an average agricultural labour family in the state amounting to ₹76,017 (Chaudhary 2019: 97). The non-institutional sources like moneylenders, large farmers, servicemen, friends/relatives, etc, emerged as the major source of debt in the case of suicide victim families. These sources had the maximum share (92.63%) in the total outstanding debt while the institutional sources merely shared about 7% of the total debt. Thus, the non-institutional sources, that charged an exorbitant rate of interest along with enforcement of many tough terms and conditions on credit disbursed, dominated the rural credit market.

Socio-political and Demographic Characteristics

The characteristic features of the suicide victims like gender, age, education, marital status and involvement in sociopolitical activities reveal the status of a person in the society (Table 10). Generally, the male members are the head of the family who lead the family on all fronts of life. Many times they do not disclose their liabilities to other family members. Often, when the level of distress reached a level beyond tolerance, the male members succumb to suicide. But in some cases, the brunt of economic distress spread out to the female members of the household who end up with the same fate. Although as much as 87.57% victims were males, 12.43% were females. This shows that women labourers are under more stress as the proportion of women labourers among suicide victims is much higher than that of farm women (8.2%) in Punjab state (Singh et al 2020).

It is striking that around 64% of the victims were illiterate and around one-fourth of the victims had education up to primary and middle levels. The employability of these 79% of persons for even menial jobs was nearly zero. However, 8.31% victims were matriculate and 2.88% were qualified up to higher

Table 8: Average Family Income of Suicide Victims in Punjab

Sources of Income	Amount (₹)	Percentage
Wage labour	56,995	91.65
Service	2,787	4.48
Dairying	1,026	1.65
Pension	183	0.29
MGNREGA	26	0.04
Others (asset sale/remittance)	1,171	1.88
Total	62,188	100.00

Source: Singh et al (2020).

Table 9: Magnitude and Source of Debt among Suicide Victim Families in Punjab

Source	Average Debt (₹)	Percentage
Institutional sources	7,337	7.37
Commercial banks	6,125	6.15
Cooperative banks/societies	1,212	1.22
Non-institutional sources	92,242	92.63
Moneylenders	7,585	7.62
Large farmers	57,272	57.52
Servicemen	1,978	1.98
Shopkeeper	5,329	5.35
Friends/relatives	20,078	20.16
Total	99,579	100.00

Source: Singh et al (2020).

secondary level. Surprisingly, 22 suicide victims who were engaged as wage labourers, possessed graduation or post-graduation qualification. This scenario reveals the bleak picture of accessible education for the working class of this so-called agriculturally developed state of the country.

Table 10: Sociopolitical and Demographic Profile of Suicide Victims in Punjab

Particulars	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	6,395	87.57
Female	908	12.43
Education level		
Illiterate	4,662	63.84
Primary	1,120	15.33
Middle	682	9.34
Matriculate	607	8.31
Higher secondary	210	2.88
Graduate and postgraduate	22	0.30
Marital status		
Married	3,087	42.27
Unmarried	4,216	57.73
Age (years)		
<18	355	4.86
18–35	4,050	55.46
35–50	2,137	29.26
50–65	632	8.65
>65	129	1.77
Participation in sociopolitical activities (multiple response)		
Panchayat	69	0.94
Labour union	68	0.93
Social and religious organisations	75	1.03
No involvement in any sociopolitical activity	7,135	97.70
Overall	7303	100.00

Source: Singh et al (2020).

It is imperative to know that youth were identified to be the main victims of this phenomenon as around 55% of the deceased were in their prime age of 18 to 35 years at the time of death. Overall, as much as 85% of the suicide victims were in the age bracket of 18–50 years. Although 97.7% victims did not have any involvement in sociopolitical activities but some persons (2.3%) who were involved in these activities also took their lives. This shows that males, illiterates, unmarried and young persons were the main victims of this catastrophic occurrence.

Victims' Proneness to Habit Forming Substances

Hopelessness, psychological stress, strained relationships and the abysmal state of mental health tempts one to resort to temporary peace in alcohol or other intoxicants. In many cases, farmers—employers of agricultural labourers—provide intoxicants to the labourers with the hope to increase work efficiency of labourers in a specified time. Unlike the common belief, it was found that more than half of the suicide victims (52.16%) were teetotallers, whereas only 23.27%

Table 11: Intoxicating Habits of Suicide Victims in Punjab

Level of Intoxication	Number	Percentage
Addicts	1,700	23.27
(i) Alcoholic	738	10.10
(ii) Synthetic drugs abuser	768	10.52
(iii) Opium/poppy husk habitual	194	2.65
Occasional alcohol habitual	1,794	24.57
Teetotaller	3,809	52.16
Total	7,303	100.00

Source: Singh et al (2020).

victims were addicts (Table 11, p 53). Among the addicts, about 10% were alcoholic, 10.52% were synthetic drug abusers and 2.65% were habitual to opium/poppy husk consumption. Further, around one-fourth rarely consumed alcohol or any other intoxicant.

After-effects of Suicides

Socio-economic and psychological factors intertwined with the everlasting pain and agony after a suicide in the family have serious impact on the family members. Surprisingly, nearly half of the deceased households had no earning member left in the family (Table 12). One can imagine the current situation of the family which was already deprived at the time when the sole earner was alive. That is why they had to take their life. How family is currently coping without any source of livelihood? This self-explanatory question clears the issue that the victim family has been passing through a critical juncture of life. In the case of about 44% victim families, the members were pushed towards the state of depression. About one-third of the families encountered serious illness of the family members. It is essential to know that the aged persons in the agricultural labour suicide victim families have been facing dire psychological consequences of this crisis. Even the schoolgoing children in around 12% victim families dropped out after the incidence of suicide in a family. The suicide of the head of the family led to unusual complications. In about 12% of families, marriages of the children, particularly of girls, were interrupted as people were hesitant to establish relationships with families with a background of suicide that is often considered as a social stigma. This narrative explains the dire socio-psychological consequences of suicide on the victim family.

Table 12: Socio-psycho and Economic Impact on Victim Families after Suicides in Punjab (Multiple response)

After-effects	Number of Families	Percentage
No earning member	3,473	49.66
Family member under depression	3,044	43.54
Bad condition of old aged family member	2,333	33.36
Family member seriously ill	2,084	29.80
Domestic dispute	868	12.41
Schooling dropped by children	832	11.90
Interruption in marriage of children	825	11.80
Others*	33	0.47

*Others include financial crunch, sale of house, death of parents, sale of livestock, etc.
Source: Singh et al (2020).

Post the occurrence of a suicide, a mammoth change was observed in the overall state of the victim family (Table 13). Majority (52%) of the victim families were entrapped in the critical economic condition after the suicide as the sole earner in most of these families died by suicide. Similarly, about one-third of these families faced discriminative socio-economic conditions (bad). However, over 14% victim families were able to lead a life similar to a pre-suicide phase (normal). Overall, as many

Table 13: Change in Overall Economic Condition of Victim Families after Suicides in Punjab

Condition of Family	Number of Families	Percentage
Critical	3,638	52.02
Bad	2,348	33.58
Normal	1,007	14.40
Total	6,993	100.00

Source: Singh et al (2020).

as 85% of the victim families have been passing through the period of dire economic hardship.

Relief Measures Sought by Victim Families

The victim families were longing for help from the government to address their economic sufferings. As many as 95% of the agricultural labour victim families sought financial assistance (Table 14) as these victim families had been living under punitive economic conditions.

Table 14: Help Sought by Victim Families from the Government in Punjab

(Multiple response)

Demands	Number of Families	Percentage
Direct financial assistance	6,644	95.00
Free medical	2,541	36.34
Family pension	2,468	35.31
Solution for non-institutional debt	1,612	23.06
Job for a family member	1,580	22.60
Increase in old age pension	1,314	18.79
Free higher education	927	13.26
Waiver of institutional debt	480	6.86
Return back of mortgaged property	52	0.74
Others*	239	3.42

*Help to improve allied occupation, control on drugs availability, etc.

Source: Singh et al (2020).

That more than one-third of the victim families desired free medical assistance corroborates the fact that illness was identified as one of the major reasons of suicide. Similarly, another one-third of the victims expected financial support in form of family pension for the dependents of the deceased. Since debt burden emerged as the main factor that pushed victim families under economic stress, therefore, 23% of the victim families stressed upon the need to waive non-institutional debt, while 6.86% respondents asked for debt waiver of institutional debt. Further, over 22% of the families were hoping for a job arrangement from the government; around 19% opined that the existing old-age pension was meagre, and thus, there was a need to increase the amount of old age pension. Some labour families wished for free higher education to their children along with alternative economic assistance to the family.

Policy Concerns

The situation of agricultural labourers in Punjab, an agriculturally developed state of India, is grim and painful. The occurrence of labour suicides has not only severely affected labour families but the distress has penetrated into different facets of rural life. Therefore, there is an urgent need to address this menace through twofold measures and policies: (i) short-term policies to extend immediate relief for victim families; and (ii) long-term policies of comprehensive development that would deter suicides and create conditions conducive for harmonious social and economic existence of the rural society in general and the working class in particular.

(i) Short-term policy measures: Indebtedness emerged as the leading factor of agricultural labourer suicides as 79% of the victims succumbed to heavy debt burden. As much as 93% of the total debt amount on the victim families was borrowed

from non-institutional sources. The outstanding amount of loan procured from non-institutional sources accumulates at a higher rate relative to the institutional debt due to high cost of borrowing. Not to mention, the chances of falling in debt-trap are higher as these sources tend to circumvent the rules and regulations of the credit market and often do not fall under the purview of fair lending as they entail difficult terms and conditions, such as harsh repayment schedules and excessive rate of interest. In this regard, regulating and properly monitoring the non-institutional credit agencies is of paramount importance, especially when cases of social and physical pressure exerted by these sources on victim families are rampant. In such a situation, it is essential to waive off the debt amount of formal as well as informal sources of victim families. Above all, a reasonable compensation should be provided to all the victim families within one week of the happening of the suicide.

The Government of Punjab has formulated policy to provide relief in the case of suicidal deaths of farmers and farm labourers due to indebtedness in the state. The policy included a compensation of ₹3 lakh along with rehabilitation and preventive measures of support to the distressed family (GoP 2015). But, in many cases, the agricultural labourer families are often deprived of this compensation due to some reasons. Generally, agricultural labourers are indebted to the non-institutional sources, particularly landlords. Although these agencies disburse loan, they never provide any written documents to the creditor (labourers). Therefore, the victim families of creditors are unable to show any document of credit amount for getting compensation. Furthermore, the institutional financial agencies advance collateral loans while agricultural labour households having poor assets base were lacking to pay any security as collateral. As a result, they were deprived of getting any credit from institutional sources. In such cases, suicides were not an occurrence of debt burden but these happened due to being deprived of debt and dire financial distress. Another reason for depriving of the compensation was inability of victim family to produce required documents for the compensation, such as post-mortem report, death certificate, and so on, as a large number of labourers are illiterate. Therefore, the compensation should be provided to all deceased labour families with the attestation of village panchayat irrespective of the reasons of suicide or lacking of documents and other paperwork formalities.

It is unfortunate that around half of the victim families of the state had lost their sole breadwinners. Obviously, these families are now facing dire economic hardship and socio-psychological insecurity. The problems of these victim families must be addressed on priority. Therefore, a reasonable financial compensation along with permanent source of livelihood like family pension, employment to next kin of the victim must be provided so that these families can eke out living in this terrible phase of livelihood.

The women of agricultural labourers are severely stressed as the proportion of women labourers among suicide victims is much higher (12.43%) than that of farm women (8.2%).

Similarly, the youth is the main victim of this crisis as majority of the deceased were in the prime young age of 18–35 years at the time of death. Therefore, these sections must be provided with reasonable livelihood through various measures. The dependents of these families must be given family pension or other economic support. The so-called flagship programme of the government—MGNREGA, contributed negligible share in victim's family income. Therefore, this scheme should be made effective by enhancing its wage rates and actual days of employment from existing 100 days to 300 days annually especially for the members of deceased families.

The slogan of universalisation of education of the government seems unfulfilled as two-third of the victims were illiterate and next one-fourth were primary or middle passed; sadly these were ineligible for even a menial job. It is painful to know that the children of 12% of victim families left schooling due to deplorable conditions of the family. These children need mental and emotional rehabilitation. In such a scenario, prompt action should be taken for sending these children to school by providing free education with scholarships along with extending socio-psychological support to the children.

A large number of persons in the victim families have been facing the problems of physical and mental illness. Free and quality medical services should be made available to victim families so that they can live a healthy life and avoid taking huge loans for the treatment of illness. As many agricultural labourer suicides were the outcome of sociological and other reasons like family discord, drug addiction and social celebration, a mass campaign should be launched to address these issues. It is catastrophic that the act of suicide in the family interrupted the marriages of around 12% children, particularly in case of girls. In such a situation, economic and psycho-social support to the family is of urgent significance. Therefore, the government should make the prevailing Shagun (gift) scheme effective by improving the delivery and amount of payment especially in the case of victim families.

(ii) Long-term policy measures: Apart from the above given immediate measures, the economic status of this poor section should be improved on sustainable basis through a comprehensive and long-term policy measures. First of all, the prevailing minimum wages in the rural economy are not sufficient for the minimum desirable level of living. Therefore, these wage rates should be increased as per the inflation, expensive social sector and cost of living. In this light, an effectiveness of stipulated wage rates should be ensured and constantly enhanced. Second, the land-related legal entitlements of the landless labourers must be safeguarded. As per the Punjab Village Common Lands (Regulation) Act, 1961, one-third of the cultivated common land should be leased-out to SC/BC. But in practice they are being deprived of this right. The Punjab Security of Land Tenure Act, 1953 protects the rights of the tenants by fixing the maximum land rent to one-third of the total value of the crop. But in practice, the land rent for leased land is much higher than permissible rent limits. This act must be strictly followed so that the tenants can earn

livelihood by leasing-in land from the landlords. In the same way, the Punjab Land Reforms Act, 1972 stipulates maximum permissible irrigated landowning of 7 hectares but this is often defied as many farmers in the state owned more than the permissible limit of land. Therefore, it is urgent to distribute lease out one-third of common property land and surplus land with the landlords, on nominal rates, among landless labourers to empower them with means to earn their livelihood. Furthermore, as the farming on tiny-sized holdings is not a viable entity, cooperative farming should be initiated by providing subsidised inputs and market support. Third, the housing conditions, healthcare and education of the labour families are very poor. The government should take effective steps through massive investment, institutional set up and policy initiatives for the improvement of living and working

conditions of the rural labour class. Moreover, for organising social ceremonies, the community centres equipped with catering facilities and subsidised food articles should be set up in every village of the state so that the working class can solemnise the minimum required social functions with their limited means. Lastly, the enduring solution to address the crisis lies in enhancing the livelihood of working class through the development of rural industrialisation based on agro-processing and value addition. This strategy would stimulate backward (input) and forward (output) linkages in the economy. As a result, ample employment opportunities would be generated at the door step of labourers along with optimum use of time and local resources. This bottom-up approach would help enhance the socio-economic status of the working class in the countryside.

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