

Farmer Suicides in India: Trends and Policy Implications

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Abstract

Farmers' suicide in India has been a debatable issue for decades. One farmer/farm laborer dies by suicide every hour in India. The purpose of this study is to analyze the trends in farmers' suicides. The findings of the study showed an increase in farmers' suicides in recent years and suggested the need for a more comprehensive method for the collection of data related to farmers' suicides. This study provides valuable insights regarding the number and causes of farmers' suicides concerning ensuring the well-being of the farming community.

Keywords: Agriculture, Farmers' suicide, Indebtedness, Climate change, India.

Introduction

In agrarian economies like India, agriculture has been an integral sector and served as an imperative driver of food security, industrial growth, and employment. Despite the industrial expansion over time, it continues to employ the majority of the workforce in India. The role of farmers is not limited to ensuring food security by producing necessary crops such as wheat, rice, and pulses but their efforts have put India in a condition to cater to global needs by exporting agricultural produce. Figure 1 represents the agricultural production over the years in India. It indicates the phenomenal growth in terms of production. However, higher productivity does not always guarantee increased income for farmers (Chand, 2017).

Consequently, the low absolute income level combined with consistent fluctuations has evolved as an obvious outcome for the farmers (FAO, 2017). Birthal (2017) found that per capita income of less than Rupees 15000 for more than seventy percent of the farmers. A median farmer in 17 Indian states is surviving on less than Rupees 1700 average monthly income (Sharma, 2018). Moreover, Alvarage, 2020; Khan (2019) observed as a common occurrence in developing nations the great differences between the income of agricultural and non-agricultural households. Modern average farmers make between thirty and forty percent of the income generated by urban non-farm workers (Ali, 2018). The situation of a farmer is rather similar to that of a 1980s cultivator living with one-third income as compared to non-agricultural workers (Chand, 2017). Many farmers are involved in agriculture only because their skills are less than those of other fields and are ready to migrate if given the chance (Agarwal & Agarwal, 2017; Ranganathan, 2015; Sharma 2018; Suri, 2006).

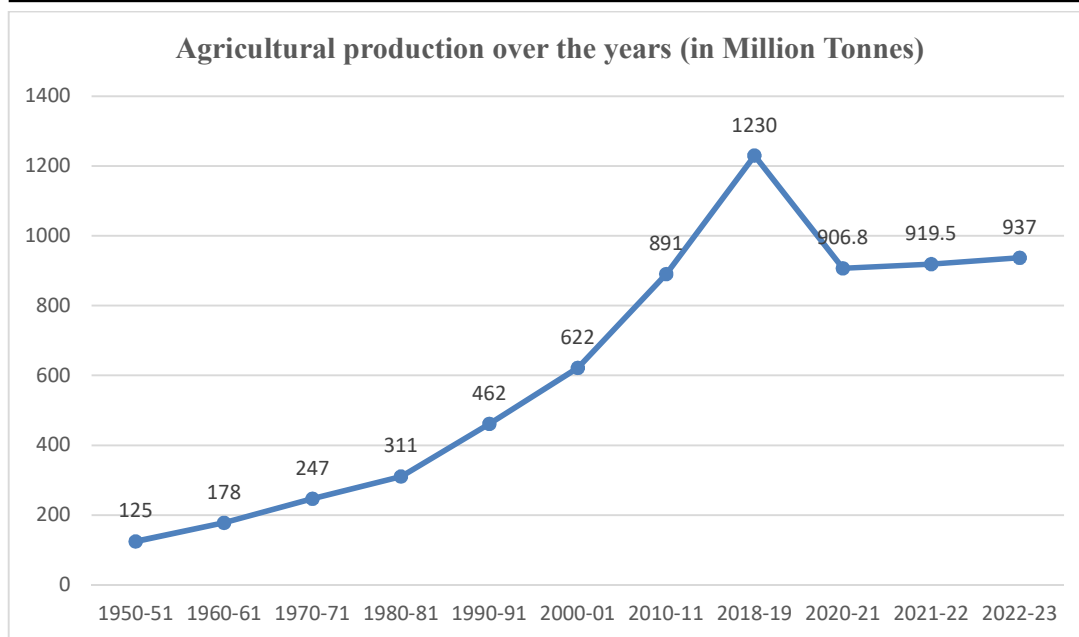


Figure 1: Food production in India

Source: Economic Survey 2023-24; Chand, 2017

The intensity of the above-mentioned issues is expressed by the number of suicides committed by households engaged in agriculture. The current study attempts to analyze the trends in farmers in the current decade. The study considered the number of farmers' suicides from 2014 to 2022.

Research Methodology

In order to fulfill the objective of the study a mixed-method approach was used in this study that includes qualitative insights along with quantitative data which is retrieved from the reports of the National Crime Record Bureau from 2014 to 2022. The data of these reports presents the data related to farmers' suicides comprehensively. For analyzing the data, frequency, and percentage are utilized.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

According to the data provided by the National Crime Record Bureau, there have been at least 112,000 people in India who have committed suicide over the course of the last ten years while working in the agricultural industry. There were 11,290 farmers and farm laborers who were reported to have committed suicide in 2022 alone, according to the most recent data that is freely accessible. Table 1 represents the data related to farmers' suicides in India from 2013 to 2022. It also shows the percentage of these suicides in the total suicides committed in the country.

Table 1: Suicides committed by the people engaged in farming

Year	No. of Suicides	Percentage of Total Suicides
2013	11772	8.70
2014	12360	9.40
2015	12602	9.40
2016	11379	8.70
2017	10655	8.20
2018	10349	7.70
2019	10281	7.45
2020	10677	7.00
2021	10881	6.60
2022	11290	6.60

(Source: NCRB Reports of respective year from 2014 to 2023)

The incidence of suicides among farmers increased in 2014 and 2015. In 2015, it reached 12,602, an increase from 11,772 in 2014. In 2015, the suicide rate reached its apex. In that year, 10 out of 100 individuals who committed suicide were part of the agricultural sector. Following 2015, the incidence of suicides exhibited a consistent decline until 2019. The number of suicides from 2015 to 2019 diminished by over 2000, representing a substantial reduction.

In 2019, while all other sectors of the economy were adversely affected by the COVID pandemic, the agricultural sector emerged as a savior, demonstrating growth exceeding 3 percent. However, the incidence of suicides also rose during this period. The number of suicides increased to 11,290 in 2022, up from 10,281 in 2019.

Although the reasons for these phenomena are complex and case-specific, experts highlight patterns of common contributing factors. A recent study established a correlation between the climate crisis and farmer suicides, indicating that these fatalities rise during years of rainfall deficit, which adversely affects yields and exacerbates economic distress (Mishra, 2023). During 2022, many states recorded drought conditions and untimely incessant rainfall because of which crops that were already standing had been destroyed (Shagun, 2023).

Conclusion

Overall, the absolute number of suicides as well as the proportion of these suicides in total suicides committed in the country showed a gradual decrease over the decade. In 2015, the highest number of farmers' suicides was recorded whereas 2019 was the year with the lowest of the decade. The possible reasons for the decreasing trend in farmers suicides could be positive modification in the policies, increased awareness related to mental health. However, the average number of suicides per annum suggests the need of sustainable efforts in order to ensure the wellbeing of farming community.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research Direction

The major limitation of this study lies in its dependence on secondary data which is arguably a debatable issue because of its reliability in terms of categorization of the number of suicides committed by the farmers. Thus, a more comprehensive method for the collection of data is suggested in order to address the issue effectively.

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