



FARMER SUICIDES: SOCIOECONOMIC CAUSES AND PREVENTIVE STRATEGIES

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Introduction

Agriculture remains the backbone of the Indian economy, employing over 50% of the country's workforce and contributing significantly to national food security and rural livelihoods. Despite its importance, the sector has faced increasing stress in recent decades due to multiple interconnected challenges such as climate change, erratic rainfall patterns, soil degradation, water scarcity, declining profitability, and fluctuating market prices. In addition, structural issues like fragmented landholdings, rising input costs, inadequate access to institutional credit, and poor extension services have made farming a high-risk occupation, especially for small and marginal farmers. One of the most alarming consequences of these pressures has been the steady rise in farmer suicides across various states in India.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), thousands of farmers and agricultural laborers take their own lives each year, often driven by a combination of financial distress, crop failure, indebtedness, and a lack of support systems. The emotional and economic burden faced by these farmers, coupled with inadequate institutional responses, has made this a deep-rooted crisis demanding urgent and comprehensive policy attention.

Farmer suicides are not merely individual tragedies—they reflect a systemic failure that affects rural development, food production, and social equity. Understanding the underlying socioeconomic causes is essential for crafting effective preventive strategies. Without targeted

interventions, the cycle of rural distress and despair may continue, threatening the very sustainability of India's agricultural economy.

Socioeconomic Profile of Affected Farmers

The majority of farmers who commit suicide belong to economically weaker sections. They often own small landholdings or are tenant farmers without land ownership. These farmers typically rely on rain-fed agriculture, lack access to institutional credit, and have limited education or exposure to modern farming practices.

There is also a regional disparity, with higher suicide rates observed in states like Maharashtra, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. These farmers often struggle with low and unstable incomes, making them highly vulnerable to financial shocks. Limited access to support services, poor market connectivity, and social isolation further compound their distress. The concentration of suicides in specific regions highlights the role of local agro-climatic, economic, and policy factors in influencing farmer vulnerability.

Major Socioeconomic Causes of Farmer Suicides

1. Indebtedness and Credit Issues

One of the primary reasons for farmer suicides is indebtedness. Farmers often borrow money from informal sources like moneylenders due to the inaccessibility of institutional loans. High interest rates and the pressure to repay loans, especially after crop failures, push many into a debt trap.

2. Crop Failure and Natural Calamities

Erratic weather patterns, prolonged droughts, floods, and pest infestations significantly affect crop yields. With limited or no crop insurance coverage, farmers are left with huge losses that they cannot recover from, leading to extreme distress.

3. Market and Price-Related Issues

Even when farmers manage to produce a good harvest, they face issues like low market prices, lack of MSP enforcement, and exploitation by intermediaries. These factors prevent them from earning a sustainable income.

4. Policy and Institutional Failures

Although various schemes exist to support farmers, the implementation often falls short. Delays in compensation, lack of awareness about government programs, and poor extension services contribute to the problem.

5. Psychosocial and Cultural Factors

Social pressures, family responsibilities, and lack of mental health support contribute to the problem. Depression, anxiety, and isolation are common among distressed farmers, yet there is minimal access to psychological counseling in rural areas.

Impact of Farmer Suicides

The impact of farmer suicides is both economic and social. Families are left with debt, emotional trauma, and an uncertain future. Children are often forced to drop out of school, and women bear the brunt of financial and familial responsibilities. Rural communities experience migration and disintegration as agriculture becomes increasingly unviable. The ripple effects also undermine local economies and food security, weakening the resilience of rural communities. In many cases, the psychological burden on surviving family members goes unaddressed, perpetuating a cycle of distress and hardship.

Preventive Strategies and Policy Measures

1. Financial Interventions

Improving access to low-interest institutional credit and expanding schemes like PM-KISAN and loan waivers can ease the

financial burden. Timely disbursement of funds and simplification of procedures are essential.

2. Crop and Risk Management

Promoting diversified cropping systems, drought-resilient varieties, and awareness of crop insurance (like PMFBY) can help farmers manage risks better.

3. Market Support and Infrastructure

Ensuring fair prices through effective MSP implementation, establishing farmer producer organizations (FPOs), and improving rural infrastructure such as storage facilities and cold chains will help stabilize incomes.

4. Mental Health and Social Support

Establishing mental health helplines, rural counseling centers, and community-based support networks can address the psychological aspects of the crisis.

5. Extension and Awareness Campaigns

Strengthening extension services, promoting financial literacy, and using digital platforms for awareness about government schemes are vital for empowering farmers.

Case Studies and Successful Interventions

In the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, community-based support groups and counseling programs have shown positive outcomes in reducing suicide rates. Initiatives like the Yuva Mitra and MAHAN Trust have provided emotional support, guidance on sustainable farming techniques, and helped farmers access government schemes. These grassroots efforts have proven that localized, participatory interventions can create meaningful change.

Andhra Pradesh's Rythu Bharosa Kendras serve as a model for integrated agricultural support, offering soil testing, input distribution, crop advisory, and procurement services under one roof. This convergence of services has improved farmer access to timely information, minimized dependence on intermediaries, and helped stabilize farm incomes.

In Tamil Nadu, NGOs such as Kudumbam and SEED Trust have promoted natural farming, capacity building, and self-help

groups among smallholder farmers. These programs emphasize low-input, sustainable practices that reduce dependency on external inputs and debts, thereby enhancing the resilience of farmers to both economic and environmental shocks.

Conclusion

Farmer suicides are a symptom of deeper structural issues in Indian agriculture. Addressing them requires a holistic approach involving economic reforms, social support systems, and strong political will. Sustainable farming practices, efficient policy implementation, and rural mental health programs can pave the way for a secure and dignified life for farmers, who are the backbone of the nation. Moreover, empowering farmers through skill development, access to real-time weather and market data, and collective bargaining mechanisms like cooperatives can significantly enhance their resilience. Collaborative efforts involving government, civil society, academic institutions, and private stakeholders are crucial in building a sustainable agricultural ecosystem. Only through coordinated and inclusive action can we ensure that no farmer feels so hopeless that suicide appears to be the only option.