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# Farmers' Suicide: Causes and Policy Prescription in West Bengal

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# Executive Summary

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## **Background:**

Since independence, Indian society has experienced dozens of economic plans being implemented, and all these plans have been seemingly taken to ensure an egalitarian distribution of income and wealth among all its stakeholders in the society. In India, agriculture, being one of the main sources of livelihood, was always considered the top priority by policymakers. Although agriculture is considered the principal source of livelihood in rural India, it is incapable of delivering both financial and social security to the farming sector. Suicide is considered one of the foremost causes of death in the world and stands tenth in the list of causes of death. Farmers' suicide is a social menace and a very sensitive issue in India that requires immediate attention and sympathy from policymakers to cope with the situation at the earliest.

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) is the chief authority in India and is involved in crime-related data collection and analysis, including suicides. NCRB reported zero farmers' suicides during 2012 in as many as 12 States, and 6 Union Territories, including three major states like West Bengal, Rajasthan, and Bihar. In 2010, in contrast, not a single state claimed zero suicide, although several newspapers and media outlets were claiming farmers' suicides in these states. There are various reasons behind this farmer's catastrophe, such as the inability to repay loans mostly taken from non-institutional sources, crop failure due to unanticipated climate shocks, price volatility in cash crops, a surge in input costs in terms of both the material and labour costs, losses in non-farm activities, family problems, and even chronic illness. The present study, titled "*Farmers' Suicide: Causes and Policy Prescription in India*", is an attempt to develop an in-depth understanding of agrarian distress and farmers' suicide in the Indian agrarian scenario (in West Bengal as well) and to make some policy suggestions to prevent such incidents in the future, with the following specific objectives:

- 1. To study the trends in inter-state variation in the farmers' suicide rates and the causes of these differences.**
- 2. To identify the factors that influenced the intensity of farmers' suicide among the different farm categories and responses.**
- 3. To resurvey the victim's household (old households of 2016-17) and analyse the impact of victim's livelihood security of farm families.**
- 4. Ways to tackle the root cause of the farmers' suicide with the best pragmatic remedies.**
- 5. To document the status and implementation of the farmer suicide relief scheme.**

In the methodological aspects, the study was conducted mainly with two segments. The first segment is to resurvey the present conditions of the farmers' suicide households surveyed in the year 2016-17 for a study conducted by the same coordination unit in the year 2017, and the second part is to survey the farming households that committed suicide in the reference year 2020-21. As there were no official records of farmers' suicide in West Bengal during the reference periods (October 2020-September 2021), this study mainly focused only on the first segment of the proposed study.

It is also important to mention that in the previous study (2017), 30 households across three districts, viz., Burdwan (*after 2017, bifurcated as two separate districts, Purba and Paschim Bardhaman; our sample was confined to Purba Bardhaman only*), Birbhum, and North 24-Parganas, have been interviewed with the help of the snowball sampling technique, mainly through newspaper reports. The present study also focused on resurveying all the farmer suicide households surveyed in the previous study, but in 2020-21, the re-survey was conducted on 27 households, and the remaining 3 households were untraced, as these households shifted their old habitat (or became abandoned in one case) after the previous survey.

### **Major Findings:**

The major findings of the study are summarised below:

The main conclusions that can be drawn from the findings of this study are as follows:

- I. According to the NCRB report, zero cases of farmers' suicide have been recorded for West Bengal since 2012. Resurveys of old households have been conducted based on the author's own source by adapting snowball sampling and various newspaper reports. For that reason, data related to the number, percentage, district-wise, and gender-wise distribution cannot be calculated. But, as per the report of 2016-17, the claim of zero suicide does not match the ground realities.
- II. Looking into the socio-economic profile of sample households, it is found that most of the family heads are aged females, and the literacy rate among them is very low. It is also evident that most of the deceased farmers' families are of a nuclear type with a family size of four or fewer members in the family.
- III. The most miserable picture is observed from the re-survey that 50 per cent of the total population is dependent in nature, i.e., living without any earning sources during the reference survey period, followed by cultivation and agricultural labour.
- IV. It is also observed that most of the victim households are poor in terms of their PDS card holding status, implying that the benefit of Public Distribution Service (PDS) is indeed satisfactory to the local government. However, this is not quite an unusual case at all in rural areas.
- V. Employment opportunities are mainly concentrated in the primary sectors. 70 per cent of total occupations belong to the primary sectors, followed by the secondary sectors. Some members of the sample household are rearing milch animals not for commercial purposes but for their own consumption of milk.
- VI. All the sample households have their own houses with residential land. Most of the houses (55 per cent) are kutcha in nature, followed by pucca or semi-pucca houses, and one household is living in a khapra-type house, which implies their incapability to reside in a well-structured pucca house, probably due to a lack of finance.
- VII. The number of asset sales is higher than assets purchased by the deceased farmer's households in the last five years, indicating the households have still been facing financial instability for the last five years.

- VIII. Presently, the holding of agricultural assets is very low for the sample households. About 26 per cent of total households have access to a water pump for irrigation, and the percentage is 11 for the holding of a thresher. In the case of non-agricultural assets, it is found that the average asset holdings are pretty low.
- IX. In the case of 14 sample households, those that are engaged in farming activities own land in terms of operational holding, whereas there are few leased-in and leased-out cultivation operations by the sample households, and the average rental value of leased-in and leased-out land is about Rs. 8000/- to Rs. 9000/- per acre, respectively in the reference year. Cropping intensity is estimated as 150% for the sample households, which is much lower than the state average (189.8%) and a little higher than the national average (144.6%).
- X. It is observed that sample households are doing farming activities for subsistence rather than for commercial purposes. This story can be supplemental as paddy is the main crop cultivated for about 55 per cent of the total Gross Cropped Area, mainly for securing their annual need of food crops.
- XI. In the case of the disposal or marketing channel, the study found that no sample farming households are involved with APMC Mandi, and most of them prefer to sell their products to private traders in both the private wholesale markets and the village markets.
- XII. In this study, three patterns of cost-return relation from cultivation are observed. Per-acre expenditure and income are very high, and net income per acre (expenditure less income) is also high, in the case of crops, vegetables, and jute. On the other hand, per-acre cost is high, but net income is low, e.g., for paddy and potato, where returns from the sale of paddy have been low over the years, and the selling price of potato has been volatile in the last few years in West Bengal. The third one is per acre cost is low, but the net income per acre is high in the case of mustard. It is clear that the second one is in the worst condition, and unfortunately, the same pattern has been seen in West Bengal, like the rest of our sample. This can be considered a significant influencing factor behind farmers' suicides in West Bengal.
- XIII. Incidents of indebtedness, i.e., the percentage of the indebted total households for the sample is 70.37%, which is very high for the study sample, and the amount of outstanding loan is more than the amount borrowed, as these are taken from local money lenders with much higher interest rates.
- XIV. Agricultural labourers, non-agricultural labourers, and self-business are the three principal earning sources among the sample households, and the net income is highest from the paddy, followed by the vegetables, mustard, jute, and potato.
- XV. Annual income share is highest from non-farm activities for the sample households (69.84%), followed by the share of off-farm income (20.30%), and farm income (9.86%), compatible with the vulnerable situation of farm income in West Bengal (29.75%, NSSO, 77th round, 2018-19).

- XVI. Share of the annual income out of total income is highest for the scheduled caste category, followed by general, OBC, and scheduled tribe categories. It is also found that victim households are spending more on staple foods (rice/wheat and pulses) and vegetables than on other food items, implying their food preference, and in the total expenditure, the share of food expenditure is more than double that of non-food expenditure, which is not very unusual for rural Bengal.
- XVII. It is estimated that the crop income-expenditure ratio and farm income-expenditure ratio are the same at level 17, concluding that the sample households have not been involved in other farming activities rather than crop cultivation, and the income-expenditure ratio is more than one (1.77), implying higher annual income than expenditure, which in turn indicates that the sample households are capable of earning adequate income to meet over expenditure, possibly by shifting their earning dependency towards non-farm and off-farm income sources rather than farming activities.
- XVIII. Changing victims' sleeping patterns and behaviour noticed by the neighbour and friend were the major symptoms observed by the victim before the incident of suicide, and most of the victim farmers committed suicide by consuming poison and hanging at home.
- XIX. In the social part of the root causes, respondents reported various types of problems faced by the victims, like poverty, family-related problems, drug or alcohol addiction, and daughter marriage-related issues. Failure of crops due to pests & diseases and meteorological issues, irrigation problems, unfulfillment of expectations of getting higher output, higher crop prices, lack of extension services, delayed payment, lack of credit facilities, and loan weaving facilities can be considered as farming-related causes for the farmers' suicide. The burden of non-institutional indebtedness with a much higher interest rate is also a prime cause of unforeseen incidents like farmers' suicide.
- XX. Farmers' suicide negatively impacted the farming activities in the victim households. The farming activities drastically declined or totally stopped in some cases after the incident, and in turn, this affected the employment pattern and income generation sources, which changed compared to before the occurrence of the incident. In most cases, it is found that the economic condition has deteriorated, which has affected the standard of living of victim households directly, and most of the respondents claimed that living standards have declined after the incident.
- XXI. Improvement in the composite dimensions, comprising all economic, social, and psychological aspects, can make some ways to tackle the drastic incidents like farmers' suicide, although it is hard to ensure the victims' state of mental health.
- XXII. PDS is the only scheme whose benefit has been reaching all sample households in terms of rice and wheat at a subsidised rate, whereas very few sample households have been availing the monetary benefit of 'PM-Kishan' (Central Government Farm Income Support scheme), and 'Krishak Bandhu' (State Government Scheme in West Bengal). The story remains the same for the housing scheme (IAY or PMAY), 'PM-Ujjwala Yojana' (LPG scheme), and 100 days of

work (MGNREGS). But most surprisingly, no households have benefited from the farmers' suicide compensation scheme.

- XXIII. Members in the sample households have experienced the highest loss of man-days to avail the central and state farm income support schemes like 'PM-Kishan' and 'Krishak Bandhu'. It is also found that net operated land, the education level of the family head along with other members, and the proportion of farm income in total income have a positive influence on getting benefits.

### **Policy Suggestions:**

Agriculture in West Bengal has been passing through a critical time, and calls for an immediate multi-sided solution that might be able to address the primary challenges faced by the farmers. The ways to tackle the root causes of farmers' suicide are really challenging, as there are various heterogeneous reasons behind this farmer's catastrophe, such as economic, social, political, and meteorological. Since agrarian and economic distress are the root causes of farmers' suicide in West Bengal, immediate attention to these dimensions is needed to secure farmers' income, which suffers from natural as well as market failure. Farmers' suicide is such a social peril in India, vis-à-vis West Bengal, that needs to be addressed and sympathised with by the policymakers at the earliest. Some possible policies are prescribed below:

- I. In general, an improvement in the composite dimensions comprises all economic, social, and psychological aspects that can make some ways to tackle the drastic incidents like farmers' suicide, although it is hard to ensure the victims' state of mental health. A development in the financial condition of the farmers is possible by reinforcing the farming activities towards a more profitable sector with an assured and appropriate compensation for environmental hazards like changes in rainfall patterns, hailstorms, etc., that affect agricultural production. On the other hand, some alternative income sources for the farmers, along with cultivation, have to be provided.
- II. The first one can be ensured by providing adequate agriculture extension facilities that may include policies towards risk management, not only in terms of climate risk, but also that have to provide input price restriction, sufficient crop harvest price, various types of crop insurance facilities, facilities for institutional loans, strengthening of the irrigation systems, improved machinery, and rural infrastructure as a whole. For the latter, an alternative livelihood support scheme is needed, like MGNREGS, the availability of various agribusiness opportunities, support for various self-employment opportunities, etc.
- III. To improve social and psychological dimensions, the best and general way is to educate the farmers. In general, farmers do not have proper conventional education. So, with the help of adult learning or adult education, basic knowledge can be provided to the farmers, which possibly will help to develop their internal as well as cognitive thinking, which can also generate alternative earning sources. Again, facilities for social counselling are another important

possible way towards the development of the social and psychological strength of the farmers.

- IV. Policy needs to be rectified towards livelihood settlement for the victim families to secure the minimum subsistence level of income. A one-time consolidated lump sum benefit or compensation is not a permanent solution in resettling the means of support of the family members of victim households. So, it is prescribed that it is a need of the hour to bring at least a single member of those victim households under any permanent livelihood support scheme with immediate effect to sustain themselves, and the rest of the family members.
- V. The former recommendation also calls for the inclusion of victim households under the loan waiver scheme, although the Central Government has not launched any loan waiver scheme in the last five years and supports the victim's family members if the loan was taken from institutional sources.
- VI. Farmers should be more encouraged to grow more diversified alternatives, and remunerative cash crops rather than sticking to the traditional ideas of cultivating only potatoes (during rabi season) or Boro paddy (during summer). Especially, small and marginal farmers need to be encouraged to grow other remunerative crops like off-season vegetables, pulses, and oilseeds.
- VII. At the same time, as suggested by the National Commission on Farmers, a higher Minimum Support Price (MSP) for all the major crops, including paddy, is very important. However, a nominal increase in MSP alone will not be sufficient unless there is appropriate improvement in the procurement infrastructure in the state, which is very poor to date.
- VIII. To protect the potato farmers from distress sales, the government must think of introducing some innovative procurement mechanisms (like MSP for paddy) for potatoes for their requirements in the mid-day meal and ICDS schemes. Timely and frequent intervention or monitoring by the government officials for procurement, storage, and export of potatoes can reduce the distress sale to a greater extent.
- IX. A particular focus also has to be required to resolve the issues of the tenant farming system, and their miserable conditions. Most of the farmers' suicide compensations or nominal benefits are allocated only to farmers with clear land titles. So, it is recommended that the tenant farmers be brought under the benefit of crop insurance schemes. For such action, an explicit and formal agreement with the landowner is needed to ensure their crop is under insurance schemes as per the rules. But unfortunately, most of the farmers are unaware of it, and the landowners also avoid this procedure. So, a proper awareness programme must be implemented such that tenant farmers can also take advantage of the crop insurance scheme, and it can be a fruitful way to avoid the misery of farmer's suicide.
- X. Other essential livelihood support schemes like *Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana*, *Ujjwala Yojana*, *Widow Pension Scheme*, *Old-age Pension Scheme*, and

*MGNREGA* should be provided mandatorily to the victim's households to protect them from further unforeseen situations.

- XI. A public awareness programme regarding the ill effects of drug addiction and alcoholism is necessary. For these counselling services, the establishment of rehabilitation centres can be of great help or a fruitful step. Simultaneously, revamping rural health facilities, which are severely inadequate in West Bengal, is also necessary to avert farmers' suicide to a broader extent.
- XII. Finally, it is also required to change the reporting system or mechanism of farmers' suicide. As we said before, the claim of 'zero farm suicide' in the official documents does not fit with ground realities. So, some alternative checks must be introduced.