

Punjab and the intensity of agri-crisis

By Inderjit Singh Jaijee

Recently, replying to a question on rural suicides, Mohanbhai Kandariya, Minister of State for Agriculture, informed Members of Parliament that 725 farmers had committed suicide in Maharashtra, in Punjab the number was 449, 342 cases were reported from Telangana, 107 from Karnataka and 58 from Andhra Pradesh.*

Based on the data quoted in the Lok Sabha, we can calculate the simple per capita (total rural population divided by number of rural suicides) and the number of suicides as a percentage of the total rural population.

The per capita calculation reveals that **Punjab has the worst per capita figure (1 for every 38,628)**. Telangana comes next (1 for every 63,114) followed by Maharashtra (1 for every 84,904, then Karnataka (1 for every 3,50,189) and lastly, Andhra (1 for every 9,71,753).** **In terms of the percentage of rural population that falls prey to suicide, Punjab is far ahead of other states.**

When a highly productive agricultural state like Punjab is beset by a high rural suicide rate it points to severe agrarian crisis all over the country and indeed, rural suicides have spread all over India.

When this problem initially came to public attention, the government attempted to underplay rural suicides. When suicides could no longer be denied, the government misrepresented the suicides as deaths of farmers only (and not rural labourers).

When the central government does address this crisis, it insists on referring only to “farmers’ suicides”. Government figures excludes family members from the ‘farmers’ category as, according to the government, they were not the *karta* and therefore not responsible for incurring debt. The restrictive categorization centred on land-owning cultivators only ignores that fact that when the farmer is in trouble, the entire rural sector is in trouble too – labourers, artisans, and even rural moneylenders.

The situation was well stated in a recent article: *Agriculture is said to be India’s largest private enterprise, engaging nearly 90 million farmers (cultivators) and 144 million landless labourers.****

We do not say that the Centre has not responded to the rural suicide issue. In 2007 a Central rehabilitation package of Rs 1,697,869 billion was worked out and the recipient

* Hindustan Times: Mar 01, 2016: Agri crisis: Punjab saw 449 farmer suicides in 2015)

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| State | Rural population | Number of suicides* | Suicides per capita* | Suicides as % of rural population |
|---------------|------------------|---------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Punjab | 17,344,192 | 449 | 1 for every 38,628 | 0.00258 |
| Telangana | 21,585,000 | 342 | 1 for every 63,114 | 0.00158 |
| Maharashtra | 61,556,074 | 725 | 1 for every 84,904 | 0.00117 |
| Karnataka | 37,469,335 | 107 | 1 for every 3,50,180 | 0.00028 |
| Andhra | 56,361,702 | 58 | 1 for every 9,71,753 | 0.00010 |

*figures stated by Union Minister of State of Agriculture before the Lok Sabha

*** Express India, April 1, 2016, *Is agriculture a business?* by Harish Damodaran.

states were identified as Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala. To this package was added ex gratia assistance of Rs 155 million, interest waiver of Rs 270,781 billion and restructuring and rescheduling loans of Rs 905,112 billion. A special package was also given to Vidarbha. Punjab and Haryana were excluded.

Later a dry land package was given to the states that were doing dry-land farming. Punjab was again excluded on the grounds that Punjab was not a dry-land area. The Central government overlooked the cost of extraction of underground water in Punjab where the water-table is sinking rapidly and sub-soil water is contaminated due to over use of fertilisers and pesticides.

In 2008 the Union Cabinet sanctioned Rs 710 billion to finance national agricultural debt waiver. Though Punjab contributes approximately 50 per cent of the grain in the national pool, of these billions, Punjab received a share of only 1.3 per cent.

Why has Punjab been ignored every time? Is it because Punjab has all along been projected as the most progressive and well-off agricultural state of the country and admitting rural suicides in Punjab would invalidate this claim and thereby compel the Union government to restructure its planning in favour of the agriculture sector? Is there any other reason why the Central government would deny aid to Punjab's rural sector?

In fact, the situation in Punjab is far worse than what Union Ministry of Agriculture figures indicate because Punjab's rural suicides have been grossly and deliberately under-reported over the years. The Punjab government has desperately tried to under-play rural suicides. It does so on the grounds that the state "cannot afford" to provide financial assistance to distressed families.

Punjab is a sensitive border state and is under constant surveillance by intelligence agencies of the Union government and the Indian Army. It is impossible that intelligence agents have failed to notice the phenomenon of rural suicide – especially as reflected by bodies in the canals.

The issue of bodies in the Bhakra Beas Mainline canal has been reported to the National Human Rights Commission which has taken cognizance of the matter.

The Punjab Police post at Khanauri Kalan is on the bank of the Bhakra Beas Mainline canal. This police post maintains a record of bodies sighted in the canal. According to this Punjab Police record, 35-45 bodies are seen at the Khanauri barrage of the Bhakra Beas Mainline canal per month. (Reported by documentary films of Rajya Sabha TV, Channel News Asia – Singapore and The Week (dated August 24, 2014). Many bodies go unnoticed because they are submerged or they pass the barrage at night. Even assuming that, per year, the number of bodies spotted at this point is around 500, over a ten year period this would put the toll by drowning alone at 50,000. This figure refers to a single point on a single canal. Punjab is veined with rivers and canals.

- 1) Agriculture is the only business where owning more than authorized capital goods (ie land) is a crime. All other businesses are free increase capital goods to any extent.
- 2) Agriculture is subjected to price control. Other businesses are free to price their goods so as to include a profit margin
- 3) Agriculture is the only business where the businessman is compelled to buy everything retail and sell everything wholesale.
- 4) North India, (Punjab, Haryana and Western UP) has been set aside for grain production. Grain prices are controlled. Crops requiring industrial processing (and therefore with greater value addition), such as sugarcane and cotton, have been diverted to Gujarat and Maharashtra. . Even the sugarcane and cotton grown in northern India are processed in western India.

Before mentioning a figure for rural suicides in Punjab, the Agriculture Ministry should check with the intelligence agencies and the National Human Rights Commission.

It appears that the Central Government wants to ignore or downplay rural suicides in Punjab. This is understandable because if Punjab, India's premier agricultural state, is in crisis, then crisis has surely overtaken every other state in the Union.

This effort to hide farmer suicide is not only peculiar to Punjab alone. This is also observed in the other states and has been widely reported in the media.

Remedial measures are long overdue and that too radical measures akin to the grassroots movement led by Gandhi-ji before independence. In colonial India, India was reduced to a source of raw materials while value-addition through processing was entirely the province of England – notably the mills of Lancastershire. Gandhi-ji's response was the khadi movement.

The pre-47 situation persists: the farmers of Punjab Haryana and Western UP farmers are pushed into cultivating wheat and paddy while processing industries are mainly located in western states. Cost of wheat and paddy are price-controlled but finished products of wheat and paddy are not. The corporate sector flourishes at the cost of the farmers. In consequence the farmers pay with their very lives.

It is time to reset our priorities. For decades, India's political leaders have clung to the trickle-down theory: make the well-to-do more prosperous and their prosperity will leak through on those below. In fact, the economic position of people on the bottom weakens by the day. Why not try the other way? Make the masses prosperous so that their prosperity rises up through every class. It is time to remember that our cities rest upon the vast swathe of India's fields. So long as India's agriculture prospers, the cities will flourish. But when we destroy our farms and by extension our rural sector, then rest assured, bramble will grow over the streets of our cities.