

The Paradox of India's Bread Basket: Farmer Suicides in Punjab

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Abstract

The rising number of farmer suicides in the Punjab region of India exposes the problem of extreme rural insecurity, which contradicts the prevalent narrative of one of the fastest-growing national economies in the world. Traditionally agrarian, Punjab's agricultural output was increased manifold when the Central Indian Government chose Punjab as the site for the "Green Revolution" in the 1960s. Three decades later, without any alternate source of employment, small and marginal farmers of Punjab continue to pursue the environmentally and economically unsustainable agrarian practices of the Green Revolution, while accumulating high agrarian debt. Though estimates vary, reports of a significant number of farmer suicides are emerging from the region known as India's "bread basket." The Central Indian Government's lack of attention to the phenomenon is exacerbating social inequalities, structural marginalization, and agrarian anxiety. After exploring the roots and various dimensions of Punjab's agrarian problem, including the effect of predominantly male suicides on women and children, this article suggests immediate policy interventions necessary on the part of the Central Government in order to create a rural human security that is equitable, inclusive, and lasting.

Introduction

In Indian Punjab,¹ various groups are reporting a significant number of farmer suicides. Movement Against State Repression (MASR), an NGO working in Southern Punjab for the past two decades, has recorded 1,738 suicides in 91 Punjabi villages between 1988 and 2010.² These 91 villages are from two sub-subdivisions of District Sangrur, one of the 20 districts of Punjab. MASR estimates at least 50,000 suicides have occurred across Punjab over the last two decades, though not all districts are equally affected.

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Other sources support MASR's general estimates. A farmers' union, Bhartiya Kisan Union (BKU-Rajewal), estimates 90,000 suicides between 1990 and 2006.³ Also, a recent State Government-commissioned report by Punjab Agriculture University reports 2,890 suicides in the two Districts of Bathinda and Sangrur between 2000 and 2008.⁴ Finally, Punjab Farmer's Commission, created by the Punjab State Government in 2005, estimates about 2,000 farmer suicides per year.⁵ Though the exact numbers are unknown, these estimates show that farmer suicides are a significant problem in Punjab.

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Farmer suicides in Punjab expose the extreme rural plight that is otherwise shadowed by the prevalent narrative of "India Rising"—the billion-strong nation of India as one of the world's fastest-growing economies. The state of Punjab has been showcased as an Indian agricultural success story since the Green Revolution, which was the parcel of development initiatives undertaken by developed countries in the late 1960s and 1970s to aid developing countries in increasing their crop yield. Yet, since this time there has been a steady increase in the number of economically-related suicides by

Punjabi farmers. During the Green Revolution, production was improved with the use of modified seeds that increased yield only when combined with expensive chemical fertilizers and irrigation. Unable to afford sufficient amounts of these expensive inputs, small farmers found their holdings becoming progressively less profitable. Meanwhile, grain prices remained comparatively low even as input costs increased. Now, three decades later, the small and marginal farmers of Punjab, in trying to pursue environmentally and economically unsustainable agrarian practices, are accumulating high debt while lacking alternative sources of income. As a result, farmers, their unions, concerned NGOs, and several academics conclude that agriculture has become a losing proposition in Indian Punjab, the farming heartland of South Asia for generations.

Farmer suicides raise issues of security, development, and human rights, which ultimately need the concerted attention of the Indian government. India is a republic of more than one billion diverse peoples, administered by a strong Central government run on a parliamentary model under its post-independence Constitution of 1950. States are relatively weak units in the Indian federal structure.⁶ Further, with regard to Punjab, the Center-State relationship has been tumultuous—a separatist movement in the 1980s was suppressed mostly through extrajudicial police practices. The Central Indian government is not addressing the relationship between Punjabi farmers' suicides and the Central Government's agrarian policies. In fact, the Center does not even recognize the suicide statistics from Punjab, though it has acknowledged other Indian states as "suicide affected." This neglect exacerbates social inequalities, structural marginalization, and desperation in Punjab. While the suicide victims are

overwhelmingly men, the women, children, and elderly become particularly vulnerable.

The Punjab suicides case illustrates how measures towards security must be developed with a long-term vision, or risk further perpetuating insecurity. The intensive Green Revolution practices that were developed in Punjab by the Central Government (with the involvement of the U.S. government and affiliated agencies such as the World Bank) as corrective measures to ensure food security for India have now placed the security of those very food providers at risk. Lessons learned from the Green Revolution are particularly important in light of the recent calls for a “Second Green Revolution” by the Indian President in her January 2010 address to the nation.⁷ Immediate policy changes are necessary to combat the distress seen in Punjab in the wake of the first Green Revolution. As elaborated in this article, truly holistic solutions will have to take into account recent history, patterns of marginalization, and unequal power relations.

Methodology

The analysis and policy recommendations in this article are the result of extensive desk research on the topic as well as field research in Punjab during winter 2008-2009, summer 2009, and spring 2010. The analysis is also necessarily informed by my growing up in Punjab's capital of Chandigarh. In winter 2008-2009, I broadly surveyed the issue in several Punjabi villages and spoke with agrarian and rural experts. In July 2009, I partnered with local Punjabi NGOs, Baba Nanak Education Society (BNES) and MASR, to interview 31 suicide-affected families in one village of Punjab's worst-affected district. I was able to speak with village elders, sarpanchs (village headmen), and local government officials. Oral consent was obtained from all interlocutors through research methodology approved by the Committee on the Use of Human Subjects of Harvard University's Institutional Review Board. In spring 2010, to aid the completion of this paper, I had several follow-up conversations with farmer advocates and agrarian experts.

Context: The ‘Bread Basket’ of India

Punjab's traditional agrarian prosperity has earned it the title of “India's bread basket.” The region's agrarian legacy is a complicated combination of old British colonial policies and subsequent post-colonial Indian government policies that followed the partition of Punjab between India and Pakistan in 1947.

Agriculture in Punjab Before Independence

The agrarian tradition of Punjab remained, and was arguably strengthened, under British colonial rule. During this time, Punjab's agrarian system was most significantly altered by the British contribution of elaborate canal systems in Punjab, named after its “Punj” or Five rivers. This brought significant increase in area irrigated by canals and thus an increase in arable lands for agriculture.⁸ The canals ebbed and flowed

with the natural cycles of weather and “while [they] only flowed four to five months a year, they provided enough irrigation for the traditional varieties of wheat and rice to grow successfully, while being ecologically sustainable—if only by default—at the same time.”⁹ Thus, this robust increase in agricultural productivity did not threaten sustainability.

Agrarian debt existed in British times, but the colonial government’s policy was to protect the Punjabi farmer over the money-lender, and it, accordingly, institutionalized safeguards against farmers’ possible indebtedness. British researchers noted an increase in money-lenders with the increase in arable land and agriculture.¹⁰ To quell the problem of growing debt pressure on farmers and prevent the transfer of land from farmers to money-lenders, the British passed the Land Alienation Act of 1900. According to this Act: professional money-lenders could not dispossess a farmer from land held for more than twenty years; the farmer’s plough-cattle, tools, and seeds could not be attached to the loan; the farmer could sue; the interest on the loan could be re-examined and potentially reduced in court; and ancestral land was no longer liable for the farmer’s debt payment unless the debt was charged upon it.¹¹ Simultaneously, British administrators launched cooperatives to help create an alternative to money-lenders and middle-men, and local arbitration societies to help dispense with lawyers who might employ the legal system against the farmers.¹² Given these colonial safeguards, Punjab at the dawn of Indian Independence in 1947 had an altered and intensified agrarian society that was also generally prosperous and self-sufficient.

The Green Revolution

In 1966, as droughts across India threatened food self-sufficiency for the newly independent country, the Central Indian Government, under international pressure, decided to pursue the Green Revolution. Punjab was singled out by the Central Government as the site for the experiment. Despite being a relatively dry state, Punjab’s colonial-era canal network and predominant agrarian population made it ripe for the Green Revolution.¹³ Foreign-developed seeds and equipment were introduced to Punjab in order to increase crop yield.¹⁴

The U.S. and international agencies played a key role in ushering in the Green Revolution to India and Punjab. During the late 1960s, India became dependent on subsidized wheat imports from the U.S. The U.S. was exporting this wheat under its PL 480/“Food for Peace” program, which had been developed in 1952 as an innovative way to create secondary foreign markets for wheat surpluses that were accumulating in U.S. storehouses.¹⁵ In the meantime, American scientists, led by Norman Borlaug (who subsequently won the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize for contributing to world peace through increasing food supply¹⁶), developed “miracle seeds” for wheat and later other grains, and developed a blueprint for a Green Revolution in the developing world.¹⁷ The prevailing wisdom in U.S. policy circles at that time was that communism could be kept at bay by combating low standards of living, rural discontent stemming from food shortage, and the problems of production.¹⁸ The U.S. was thus hoping to counter

revolutionary forces through the proposed food grain revolution.¹⁹ By 1966, U.S. President Johnson tied the food aid to India to acceptance of the Green Revolution concept. The Indian Government complied.²⁰

Long-term Effects of Agricultural Changes

The Green Revolution brought significant changes to traditional Punjabi agriculture. Its success depended on high-yield seed varieties of wheat, rice, and maize. However, these seeds increased yield only under certain circumstances: they needed much more fertilizer and irrigation. While the fertilizer-seed partnership was not a cunning plot by multinationals, it was the obvious consequence of extending Western commercial agricultural models to other areas which may not be suited for them.²¹ Farmers also began producing the water-intensive non-traditional rice crop in large quantities even though Punjab was and continues to be a primarily wheat-eating state. The farming system promoted by the Green Revolution was thus resource-intensive, while making Punjabi farmers heavily dependent on exterior inputs such as chemical fertilizers.

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The promise of the Green Revolution dwindled rather rapidly. Disillusionment increased with decreasing returns on high investments. For example, in 1971-1972, the returns on wheat cultivation were 27 percent; but by 1977-1978 cultivators complained that their returns had fallen to less than 2 percent of their investment.²² Even as early as 1983 experts were expressing concerns regarding the livelihood of marginal and small farmers: "Serious doubts have...been raised, both in India and abroad, regarding the impact of new technology on income distribution and specially on the level of living of marginal and small farmers and landless labour [sic] households."²³ Studies from the 1980s documented that small (2.5 to 5 acres) and marginal (up to 2.5 acres) farmers were not able to meet consumption needs on household income.²⁴

The Green Revolution exacerbated social divides. First, gains from the Green Revolution were directly correlated with the initial size of the land holding.²⁵ While large farmers gained information, credit, and other benefits from the new technologies, marginal and small farmers were not in a position to do so. Further, by making profits dependent on costly and large-scale inputs, the Green Revolution affected the small farmer "by reducing the economically viable size of holding."²⁶ Another societal effect was an increase in consumerism as a result of the Green Revolution. Rich farmers seemed to be squandering extra wealth on goods such as TVs and Jeeps while only using a fraction for capital investment in agriculture.²⁷ But even in the 1980s, researchers

documented that “the small and marginal farmers are left with very little to spend on superior food or other luxury items after accounting for their basic needs.”²⁸

The Green Revolution also had lasting effects on Punjabi women. New technologies generally replaced unskilled labor that many women traditionally contributed to the agrarian system.²⁹ In large land-holding families with higher economic capital, women were quickly pulled back into the domestic sphere—a sign of increased social standing.³⁰ The Green Revolution, with its enabling of increased consumerism, has also been associated with an increase in dowry demands.³¹ Societal expectations for dowry became generally high, even though small farmers continued to be in no position to meet the increased demands.

There are thus several challenges to the prevailing wisdom that the Green Revolution was a success, especially for Punjab. Even some organizations that initially promoted the Revolution, such as the International Rice Research Institute and the World Bank, are now voicing concern over its results.³² Yet the Government of India continues to hail the Green Revolution as an “unprecedented success” and a “miracle”³³ for helping to quell food insecurity in the nation. Punjab still contributes 70 percent of wheat and 48 to 50 percent of rice to the national pool (even though not a rice-eating state itself) while it is only 1.5 percent of the area of India.³⁴ As a result, the Government has not yet sufficiently corrected for the after-shocks of the Revolution, but rather has followed policies that have exacerbated the plight of the marginal and small Punjabi farmers.

Relations between Punjab and the Central Indian Government

The Central Government exercises strong control over the constituent states of the Republic of India. With Punjab, the Center has had an unstable relationship ever since Indian independence in 1947. The tensions escalated after the Green Revolution, as Central Government policies coupled with the Revolution’s after-effects increased disgruntlement in the Punjabi population, especially Punjabi-Sikhs.³⁵

One of the issues that remains at the heart of Center-State tension is access to river water. The water dispute between Punjab and the Central Government began in earnest at the same time that the failed promises of the Green Revolution began to be felt. After British decolonization of the sub-continent and the partition of Punjab between Pakistan and India, the Indian side of Punjab was left with three of its five rivers: Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej. Indian Punjab was then “reorganized” on November 1, 1966—two additional states, Haryana and Himachal, were carved out of Punjab.³⁶ The river Yamuna flowed on the eastern boundary of Haryana while Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej continued to be intra-state rivers of the new, smaller Punjab. In 1976, the Central Government of India issued a notification for Punjab river waters to be allocated to Haryana without any compensation to the Punjab state or Punjabis.

By 1978, canal construction began diverting the waters from Punjab to Haryana, but was interrupted by Punjab’s claim to its water rights.³⁷ Haryana took the dispute to the Indian Supreme Court and demanded that Punjab comply with the water

diversion. Punjab responded by challenging the legality of the provision under the Reorganization Act itself. Under the Indian Constitution,³⁸ rivers in a state are under the legislative domain of that state, and the Parliament can make laws only with respect to matters concerning inter-state rivers and river valleys. Not even the Supreme Court has this right because the Constitution keeps such politically contentious issues out of the jurisdiction of the courts. The Supreme Court nevertheless made a decision on Punjab waters, arguing that it was not deciding a water issue as much as Punjab's legal obligations,³⁹ and directing the Central government to undertake the construction of the Punjab portion of the Sutlej-Yamuna canal, which Punjab had been refusing to make.

The Central Government has remained at the helm of the entire water dispute from its inception. During Indira Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister, negotiations were attempted to pacify the Punjab Government while moving forth with the original water diversion plan. The water dispute soon fuelled militancy in Punjab. It has, however, outlived that militancy to rage even in the present day. The 2004 directive by the Supreme Court for the Central Government to take on the construction of the Punjab portion of the Sutlej-Yamuna canal provoked outrage in Punjab. The Punjab Assembly responded by annulling all previous agreements pertaining to the Ravi-Beas waters,⁴⁰ which led the Central Government to take the matter again to the Supreme Court.⁴¹

For Punjabi farmers, the water diversion signifies a great injustice by the Central Government. Punjab's water channels have been diverted even as post-Green Revolution agricultural demands require farmers to have more intensive irrigation systems. Since the new hybrid wheat seeds of the 1960s used three times more water than traditional seed varieties, increased water flows are essential.⁴² Most of the intensive irrigation requirements are met through an increase in the number of tube-wells in Punjab. This proliferation of tube-wells has, in turn, over the years lowered the water table, yet again increasing the demand for water. In sum, the Central Government's diversion of river water after the Green Revolution has led to scarcity of water, which is an essential and expensive input for agriculture, and thus increased the plight of the Punjabi farmer.⁴³

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As the after-effects of the Green Revolution began to be felt, Punjab also lost its second most popular avenue of employment since British times: the Indian Army. Although Punjabi Sikhs had been heavily recruited post-World War I, a quota was imposed in 1974 on the number of Sikhs who could serve in the Indian Army.⁴⁴ The quota effectively reduced the number of Punjabi Sikh recruits from 17 percent to 2 percent and left many Punjabi Sikhs unemployed with no livelihood alternatives to

agriculture. Agrarian researchers identified this dilemma in the early 1980s and recommended that “efforts should be made to involve marginal and small farmers in allied agricultural and non-agricultural activities on an increasing scale to provide them with higher productive employment.”⁴⁵

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In the late 1970s through the early 1980s, large-scale protests, demonstrations, and appeals for increased state autonomy were made by Punjab politicians and the general public, particularly farmers. A large number of the Punjabi grievances with the Center have always been related to agriculture. The seminal document encapsulating these demands is the “Anandpur Sahib Resolution” from the Punjab Government to the Center. It contained several recommendations that were never accepted but are worth revisiting to address some of Punjab’s current problems, including: fixing minimum wages in the rural sector; transferring authority over agricultural price controls from the Center to the various State governments; diversification

of agriculture; industrialization to create alternative livelihoods; and removal of excise tax on tractors so small farmers can also afford mechanization. As these and other demands remained unmet, protests heightened and became widespread. In May 1984, farmers blocked the transportation of Punjabi wheat and withheld taxes from the Indian government. The government, under the orders of then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, responded by deploying 100,000 army troops in Punjab.⁴⁶ In June 1984, the Indian army attacked the temporal center of Sikhs, Darbar Sahib (known to foreigners as ‘Golden Temple’), and 32 other religious sites.⁴⁷ Thousands were killed. In November 1984, after the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards, organized massacres of Sikhs took place in New Delhi and other parts of India.⁴⁸ Sikh militancy gained popular support in Punjab. The extrajudicial tactics used by the Punjab Police on the Punjabi Sikh population became notorious across the country. While militancy was squashed by 1993-1994,⁴⁹ Punjab grievances enumerated in the “Anandpur Sahib Resolution” still remained and agrarian conditions significantly worsened.

Punjab Today: Farmer Suicides

“While the Government wishes to maintain Punjab primarily as an agrarian state that continues to feed the rest of the nation, it does not provide relief for Punjab farmers who are providing the food but suffering and dying under the after-effects of the Green Revolution.”⁵⁰

—Inderjit Singh Jaijee, Convener, MASR

MASR is a Punjab-based advocacy NGO that documents farmer suicides. It was founded in 1987 to document human rights abuses during the period of militancy. In the late 1980s, MASR’s founder, Inderjit Singh Jaijee, who worked most closely with

the village population, began noting the increasing number of agrarian suicides. He started inquiring into “the unusual situation of the Punjabi farmer, known to be proud and self-reliant, resorting to suicide.”⁵¹ After documenting hundreds of suicides in 91 villages of District Sangrur, Mr. Jaijee and MASR have completely shifted their focus to advocacy for ending suicides of Punjabi farmers and restoring their self-sufficiency. MASR’s sister organization, BNES, provides monthly stipends to families of farmers who have committed suicide to ensure they have the means to keep their children in school. MASR views BNES’ work as a crucial but temporary band-aid to rural suffering, while itself focusing on advocating the Government to permanently change the underlying agrarian policies that lead to rural indebtedness and distress.

A substantial proportion of the Punjabi work force remains dependent on agriculture for its livelihood and “faces a serious problem to be gainfully employed elsewhere in the backdrop of squeezing share of agriculture income.”⁵² The growth rate of the Punjab agricultural sector dwindled from 5.15 percent per annum in the 1980s to 2.16 percent per annum by the 1990s.⁵³ Unemployment in both the rural and urban populations has increased during this period, which suggests that workers unemployed in agriculture or industry have not found alternative employment.⁵⁴

Resource-intensive agriculture requires farmers to take large amounts of loans that are mostly found through informal sources due to the paucity of formal credit systems. Farmers thus find themselves under enormous debt and financial pressure, prompting researchers to conclude that “[i]t is the failure of the institutional set up in supplying credit commensurate with demand that is mainly responsible for the crisis and its manifestation in the form of suicides.”⁵⁵ MASR has noted that people live with constant pressure to pay back their money-lenders. In fact, as debt mounts, MASR explains that farmers even approach banks and take loans on false pretexts (e.g. to buy a tractor) only in order to pay the money-lender his installment. The money-lenders are not regulated. They levy high interest rates ranging from 24 to 30 percent and mostly operate without any formal written records. The scope of abusive usury practices is thus very large. Farmers live in a vicious cycle of debt, pressure, guilt, and lies that drive them further into more debt.

MASR estimates 50,000 suicides across Punjab from 1988 to the present. Independent estimates by farmer unions’ are less conservative than MASR’s. In 2006, Bhartiya Kisan Union (BKU) estimated 29,766 cases (from random sampling and not census sampling) in eight Punjab Districts and estimates 90,000 suicides in Punjab from 1990-2006. The government figures are, however, significantly lower. The Punjab Government Status Report in 2004 stated that there were 2,116 suicides from 1986-2005.⁵⁶

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Gendered Vulnerability

“If you had come a year ago, my mother-in-law was alive, and we were the house of three widows and two little children...so how do you think we are doing? Just getting through life, somehow...”⁵⁷

—Mother of Sant Ram who committed suicide by drowning

The surviving families of farmers who commit suicide are predominantly female. Women often become the sole supporters of families. These women, who previously managed the domestic sphere and perhaps engaged in light fieldwork, now find themselves playing the new role of breadwinner and sustaining their families amidst extreme outstanding debt. Given the traditional Punjabi gender dynamic, women are even less likely to be formally educated than men⁵⁸ and are unable to find alternative sources of employment. While most rise in the face of adversity to sustain their families, many remain deeply depressed and in a state of desperation. “If we were educated, maybe we’d have the brains to start something of our own. But we are no good. I am uneducated, she is uneducated,” said suicide victim Sant Ram’s mother waving her hand in the direction of her daughter-in-law, widowed at age 21. Some younger widows re-marry within the in-laws’ family, while others abandon the family in fear of not being able to survive in the traditional joint family system without a husband.

Young girls display signs of being particularly vulnerable to such instabilities in their family. In many families, girls were removed from school at an early age to help with household tasks.⁵⁹ Similarly, the nutritional needs and healthcare of girls

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are often secondary to the needs of their brothers. Almost all families interviewed spoke of the burden of “marrying off” and paying the dowries for daughters of suicide victims. Distressingly, a couple of girls in the village are named ‘Akki’ and ‘Batheri’; ‘Akki’ literally means “sick of” and ‘Batheri’ means “enough.” Villagers do not want to have daughters because they are seen as a burden, especially in tough economic times. Punjab has one of the nation’s most skewed sex ratios. As per the last census, the sex ratio in Punjab has now fallen below 880 girls to 1,000 boys and in some areas even as low as 754 girls to 1,000 boys.⁶⁰ In Chottiyan, Sangrur District, village elders estimated a ratio of about 700 girls to 1,000 boys.⁶¹ There is also cultural

acceptance around sex-selective abortions to avoid the long-term “cost” of having a daughter. While the trend toward sex-selective abortions cuts across economic lines,⁶² the villagers I interviewed showed likelihood to partake in the practice.

While the agrarian debt and suicides do not create gender biases, they reinforce these biases, stacking odds heavily against women and girls. Thus far, the gender

dynamic of the Punjab agrarian condition is generally under-studied. Concerted participatory research with women in affected villages is required. The current state of the women must also be considered in the context of larger policy decisions and be factored into a holistic solution to the agrarian distress.

Young and Old Faces of Vulnerability

“There is no end to the debt... Maybe you don’t know about debt here. First there was no water for our land. It was semi-dry land. No tube well. No canal water... took loans for that. Then one year the pests ate the crop. Debt increased even more...and in that we married four daughters too. Two were married before Dulla and two were married by Bhatti, after Dulla. The debt was hanging on the boys’ heads.”⁶³

—Mother of Dulla Singh and Bhatti Singh, brothers, suicide victims

Suicides also result in despair for elderly parents who depended on their farmer sons to care for them in their old age. According to MASR, the elderly display signs of deteriorating health, including depression. For example, in the multiple suicide case cited above, the household is led by the 65-year-old mother and consists of an older father, a widow, and three children. The widow, now in her 40s, was first engaged to be married to Dhulla. Dhulla committed suicide by drinking pesticide. She was then married to Bhatti and had two children. Bhatti also drank pesticide to commit suicide. The mother dominated the conversation, allowing only small snippets from her daughter-in-law, and explained how she had arranged for the repayment of outstanding debt by selling the family’s tractor and various agricultural equipment. When asked about her husband—the father of the two suicide victims, who was nowhere to be seen—she said he was useless. He laid around all day, and he was “sure not to be around too long.” Later, in a meeting with some of the village elders, it was discovered that Dhulla-Bhatti’s father also attempted suicide on two separate occasions but survived. The villagers described him as having “tension,” or depression.⁶⁴

Children in suicide-affected families are also particularly at risk. Some are raised solely by aging grandparents, while mothers seek petty jobs to make ends meet. Most of the children were reported to take very little to no interest in education. For example, Bhatti Singh’s elder son, Arjan,* dropped out of 8th grade last year. He shrugged when asked what he would like to do in the future. Agriculture is not attractive to this child who has lost his father and uncle (and nearly his grandfather) to agriculture-related debt. However, he does not see a better future through education due to the lack of alternative employment opportunities. MASR has noted that children are quickly removed from school as families sink into deeper economic despair. Education in these villages is already in dire condition. MASR notes several schools in this area where up to 300 students are being taught by one teacher. Yet even this minimal training often becomes inaccessible to children from suicide-affected families. Finally, there have been some reported cases of children forced into bonded labor, since the family has no other way to pay off the money-lenders.⁶⁵

Politics of Suicide

“The Central government is willing to concede suicides in the Southern states but not in Punjab or Haryana because Punjab has long been projected as an ‘agricultural success story.’ If it is conceded that Punjab farmers are desperate it must mean that agriculture all over India has collapsed.”⁶⁶

—MASR letter to Somnath Chatterji, Speaker, Lok Sabha, November 4, 2007

The Central Government resists acknowledging the problem of suicides in Punjab, its bread basket, for this would insinuate an insidious problem with the Indian agrarian system and the rural sector at large. The Central Government has recognized farmer suicides in other Indian states and provided compensation packages, but Punjab has received a disproportionately smaller piece of the relief pie since the Center does not acknowledge the extent of the agrarian crisis in Punjab. In 2008, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh awarded a 71,000 crore relief package (debt waivers) for Indian farmers—Punjab received only 0.75 percent of this package.⁶⁷

Compounding matters, the State Government does not acknowledge the issue of farmer suicides in Punjab. Some reasons for this may include general apathy for the poor, corruption, unwillingness to direct resources to the less vocal section of the electorate, and fear that negative rhetoric will replace the narrative projecting the State as being one of the most prosperous in India. The State Government’s response to civil society pressure around the issue of farmer suicides has been to question NGO statistics and authorize alternative research by other agencies. However, such authorized research is often delayed⁶⁸ and arguably biased.

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The Punjab State Government is responsible for the welfare of its people, but is ignoring the plight of Punjabi farmers. This was clear in my interviews with State officials, all of whom consistently denied the suicides. The local Deputy Superintendent of Police, the Tehsildar [local revenue officer], and even the local Deputy Commissioner insisted “there are no farmer suicides.”⁶⁹ Government officials typically evade all questions about the problem and instead accuse the villagers of drug addiction, over-consumption, mismanagement, and lying. Villagers fear seeking help from State officials since they are often accused of causing the suicide, which is a crime under the Indian Penal Code. Therefore, it is fair to argue that such State Government mismanagement at the least fails to prevent suicides.

Under the Indian Constitution, agriculture is a State Government matter, yet the State Government’s practical power over the agrarian situation is limited. Under the 7th

Schedule of the Constitution, agriculture is part of the “State List.” Nevertheless, several other Constitutional provisions (see Article 246) allow the Central Government to intervene in agricultural matters when they are in the “national interest.” Most significant of the interventions by the Center is its singular control over setting the Minimum Support Prices (MSPs) of grains—the pre-season price guarantee for farmers that is ensured by the Government. Economist H.S. Shergill writes, “in the first half of the present decade...the profitability of wheat and rice production was adversely affected by a number of developments. The minimum support price of wheat and rice almost stagnated...and failed to keep pace with the rising cost of production of those two grains.”⁷⁰ For example, in 2008 the Bhartiya Kisan Union (BKU) calculated the cost of production of paddy (rice) as Rs. 1810 per quintal while the MSP was Rs. 930 per quintal.⁷¹ The State Government can only raise concerns about the limitations of MSPs, but cannot actually change the MSP.⁷² Therefore, even if the State Government recognized the significance of farmer suicides and had the political will to make changes, they would be unable to address the underlying agrarian policies alone. The agrarian problem in Punjab cannot be solved without coordinated changes by the Central Indian Government.

As a result of the Central Government’s policies and the lack of assistance to Punjab, the Central Government continues to be accused of “step-motherly treatment” toward Punjab.⁷³ While such statements can be seen as political rhetoric, their credence is backed by several interlocutors in Punjab who refer to the Center’s “democratic electoral considerations.” This means that Punjab is deliberately overlooked in order to gain more votes from other states that receive Punjab grains, Central assistance, or industrial incentives. While the Central Government can respond to these allegations by challenging the direct causality of Central policies on the Punjabi farmer, the Center’s control of key agrarian policies (e.g. MSPs and diversion of Punjab river waters against international riparian norms) and the high percentage of Punjabi contribution to the Central grain pool, reinforces the belief by Punjabi farmers, NGOs, academics, and researchers that the Central Government is indeed culpable of differential treatment and negligence.

Many commentators and Punjabi farmers believe this differential treatment is simply a continuation of the strained relationship between the Center and Punjab that took the form of violent conflict in the 1980s and 1990s. While pervasive claims of torture, disappearances, extra-judicial encounters, and deaths no longer directly affect daily life in Punjab, MASR stresses that the phenomenon of farmer suicides illustrates how Punjab continues to suffer severe human rights problems.⁷⁴ Farmer suicides pose different and new human rights issues that are not simply the repercussions of past conflict and militancy. “Militancy is trotted out to explain all sorts of problems in Punjab but it has very little relevance to rural suicides. Howsoever much militancy may have impinged on state administration in the 1980s and 1990s, it never affected agricultural production,” says MASR’s Mr. Jaijee. He further explained that, in fact, the worst suicide-affected districts in Punjab, located in the Southern belt, saw the

least militancy-related deaths. Yet interviews among farmer communities reveal that memories of the militant period factor into the suicide phenomenon. For example, the Punjabi population still harbors fear of violence by the Punjab police and memories of harsh crackdowns remain fresh among farmer unions. As a result, agrarian organizing is viewed as a dangerous proposition—reinforcing the idea that farmers have nowhere to turn with their grievances.

Amidst its appeals to the Central Government's sense of obligation, MASR has advocated that curbing the suicides through changes in agrarian policies is in the Government's own interest:

In 2001, we had appraised both the President of India and the Chief Minister of Punjab that suicide is violence turned inward. It will not be long before anger and despair are turned outward and result in social and political turmoil if nothing is done to mitigate the difficulties of the rural sector. The Central government's response has been to multiply the number of paramilitary forces. The increased threat perception to the state is not from so-called "Naxalites" and "Maoists." It is from rural immiseration due to unequal distribution of the nation's wealth.⁷⁵

The Institute of Development and Communication (IDC) in Chandigarh is a think tank that often produces Government-commissioned reports. In a 2006 report sponsored by the Punjab Government the IDC has identified, albeit tentatively, the increase of suicides as a harbinger of larger unrest in the future. The report stated that "the crisis has been unleashed by the nature of development and excessive reliance on reductionist and short-sighted policy interventions."⁷⁶ Support for these criticisms even came from Manohar Singh Gill, a Union Minister in the Indian Prime Minister's Cabinet. He warned that Punjab might not be spared of the kind of "Naxal problem"⁷⁷ being faced by several Indian states: "it is a problem related to the peasantry, landless labourers and tribesmen that is being wrongly projected as a Naxal problem in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and other states. The fiscal crisis faced by small farmers and landless labourers and their exploitation is the root cause of this problem. Naxalism is, in fact, a manifestation of acute distress among small farmers and landless labourers in those states."⁷⁸

Recommendations

Given the various long-term ramifications of the urgent problem of farmer suicides, swift and holistic policy changes are imperative. These must, of course, be accompanied by civil society action for societal change. The government cannot wait on its hands for social change, which is by nature slow and painstaking. At the same time, governmental policy changes alone will not provide the silver bullet.

In order to provide a realistic timeline for progressive, holistic, and lasting change, the following recommendations are divided into immediate, medium, and long-term action. However, the urgency of the issue of farmer suicides—apparent in the increasing incidence and the various repercussions on agrarian society—dictates that the longer-

term recommendations should not be perceived as simply aspirational. All of the below need to be part of a concerted effort on all levels and are envisioned to be implemented in a five-year timeframe.

Immediate-Term (1 year)

State and Central Government must recognize suicides in Punjab and not limit their response to questioning the accuracy of the statistics. The estimates provided by various groups, including a study sponsored by the Punjab Agricultural University⁷⁹ at the Punjab Government's own request, has verified beyond any doubt that the problem of farmer suicides in Punjab is by no means insignificant. While the Governments can continue challenging the true extent of the problem, this must not continue to be their sole response. The Center and State can agree to disagree with civil society organizations on the estimates, but must create and implement specific responses to the documented and fully established cases of suicide.

Families of farmers who have committed suicides should be provided compensation. Given the plight of the surviving family members and the disturbing phenomenon of multiple suicides within one family (where the accumulation of debt leads to successive family members committing suicide), the Central Government must provide short-term compensation packages to Punjabi families of farmers who have committed suicides, as it has done for other states. Some critics allege that such compensation might encourage suicides. Not only do villagers find such logic contemptuous of the value they place on their lives and dismissive of the deep desperation that leads to suicides, but such an argument also ignores how compensation can help in alleviating pressures that lead to various disturbing trends in the deceased's family, including multiple suicides.

Informal money-lenders should be regulated in a way that does not eradicate their business. While the money-lender is an integral part of Punjabi agriculture and cannot be eradicated without risking a credit vacuum in these villages, both the Center and State governments can impose regulations on money-lenders similar to the previous British legislation that limited the interest rate, instituted a ceiling on payback amounts, protected against land alienation, and shielded farmers' primary assets. Also, Debt Conciliation Boards may be set up as dispute resolution mechanisms in situations where loans have been given at exorbitant interest rates and have no prospect of repayment. While the broader legislation regulating money-lending might need to come from the Center, the State Government's active involvement will be crucial for its enforcement and effectiveness.

Short-term (2-3 years)

Crop prices should be attached to the national price index. Currently the MSPs for the crops are too low, resulting in little or no profits by Punjabi farmers. The MSP

should be set according to the national price index, which is adjusted for inflation every six months and dictates all other prices in the country.

Civil society organizations should partake in suicide prevention education. The melancholy and sense of resignation in the suicide-affected villages and surrounding areas is palpable. Civil society campaigns should engage with villagers to explain options and the long-term ramifications of suicide on the farmer's family. Of course, realistic options and true alternatives can only be promised once the Immediate-Term Recommendations have been implemented. These campaigns should bring psychological and cultural issues underlying suicides to the fore. For example, the shame related to having large unpayable loans has been repeatedly cited as a reason for suicide. While such social pressures and prejudices cannot be removed overnight, the village community should be steadily shifting towards change. Villagers must be encouraged to stand by each other in solidarity since nearly every small and marginal farming family is undergoing similar pressures of high input costs and low returns from agriculture.

The Center should pay Punjab's farming electricity bill. Currently, the main subsidy to Punjabi farmers who provide a significant amount to the national food grain pool is that they don't have to pay for electricity (that is used primarily for tube wells and irrigation). The Punjab State pays for this electricity, amounting to over 2,500 crore Rupees, which effectively creates a consumer subsidy for India sourced from the Punjab pocket. Given Punjab's high contribution to the Central grain pool, the Central Government can politically justify providing this special concession to Punjab. Freeing up this funding would allow more State funds to be dedicated to improving the rural agrarian condition. It would also remove some of the distrust and disgruntlement that Punjabi farmers harbor against the Central Government.

Formal/institutional credit sources (government and private) should be increased. A dearth of formal sources vests immense power in the hands of the informal money-lenders. This power allows for the vicious system of abuse that contributes to the suicides. While informal money-lenders cannot be replaced quickly, more formal lending sources will help create healthy competition for the money-lenders as well as alert their borrowers to fair practices.

Pension fund and crop insurance should be created for farmers. Such measures would provide a security net for farmers in the case of serious loss due to environmental factors. Otherwise, losses of one bad crop year accumulate quickly and create the desperate situations that might prompt suicide.

Long-term (3-5 years)

The Punjab water dispute must be resolved. This is a priority long-term solution. The water dispute fuelled unrest and militancy in Punjab in the 1970s and 1980s, which may possibly resurge if the issue is not resolved. This issue is at the heart of existing

tensions between the Center and the State, and is also associated with memories of violence, militancy, and counter-insurgency. Even relying on the Supreme Court to decide this matter is not advisable, since the Supreme Court's involvement in the issue has been seen by Punjab as discriminatory and unconstitutional (see previous discussion). In accordance with international riparian laws, the Central government must resolve this dispute together with the people of Punjab. The current system adversely affects the farming industry in the state and has brought catastrophic long-term effects on the state's water table. The Central government must reassess its policies towards the redirection of Punjab's water in light of the current water deficit in Punjab, which will likely only worsen in the future. It needs to reopen negotiations with Punjab state officials to come to a mutually amenable accord.

Industrialization should be increased in the region. In North India, development has been along the main corridor of the Grand Trunk Road. This corridor does not pass through the center of the state of Punjab and the areas most affected by suicides. On the ground, this translates to paucity in alternate employment. Agriculture does not involve labor at all times of the year. Alternatives to agriculture in these areas, such as factories, can successfully absorb surplus agro-labor. Both the Central and State Government must play a role in increasing industrialization. For decades, the Central Indian Government has reasoned that Punjab was too close to the India-Pakistan border and industrial development would prove hazardous should there be another outbreak of conflict between the two nations. The Central Planning Commission should now reevaluate its decision to disallow industrialization of Punjab, considering that modern methods of warfare further dissociate the level of threat from the distance to the border. The State Government can meanwhile encourage industry in the suicide-affected districts by providing subsidies and incentives for new investors.

Civil society and the State Government should work on (i) social education on dowry and other consumption spending and (ii) education sector improvements. While social progress is put forth as a first priority by government officials and privileged sections of society, changing social norms is a long-term effort. This process will not take place overnight and cannot exist in isolation—dowry and wedding spending cannot be eradicated from the villages when it is taking place unabated in cities and promoted in mainstream media, including the giant Indian film industry of Bollywood. For the farmers committing suicide, dowry and other excessive spending are sometimes precipitating factors for suicide—but not the underlying factor. The State Government also should play a stronger role in: better enforcing teacher attendance at schools; providing incentives for low-income families to increase student attendance; and creating vocational training centers. These initiatives will increase the prospects of the next generation to expand beyond farming into other careers.

In conclusion, Punjabi farmer suicides represent a broader problem related to the marginalization of the rural sector to the benefit of burgeoning towns and cities in the developing world. Studying and addressing this issue can provide important lessons for future rural development interventions and also serve as a reminder of the importance

of holistic analysis of the many layers of human rights issues implicated in sudden economic expansion policies. Farmer suicides in post-conflict Punjab also represent how unfulfilled socio-economic rights can fuel both inward- and outward-facing violence and insecurity. Only through an immediate and a multi-staged response plan, combining policy changes by the Central and State Government with the guidance of civil society, can the Punjabi farmer truly bask in the reported glory of “India Rising.”

Endnotes

- 1 This article concerns itself with only the Indian-controlled part of Punjab. Punjab was partitioned between India and Pakistan in 1947, after Britain relinquished its colonial control.
- 2 “MASR List of Aggregate Suicides per village (1988-2010).” On file with author.
- 3 Author interview with Mr. Rajewal, Bhartiya Kisan Union, Chandigarh, Punjab, India, July 2009. Also, MASR letter to Pratibha Patil, President of India, Feb. 15, 2010. On file with author.
- 4 Punjab Agricultural University. *Farmers’ & Agricultural Labourers’ Suicides due to Indebtedness in the Punjab State--Pilot Survey in Bathinda and Sangrur Districts*. (Ludhiana, Punjab: Department of Economics & Sociology, PAU, April 2009).
- 5 See, e.g., “Loan waiver: Distressed farmers are not celebrating.” Rediff India. Anosh Malekar. (April 9, 2008). <<http://www.rediff.com/money/2008/apr/09farm.htm>>
- 6 See, e.g., Carl Baar, “Social Action Litigation in India: The Operation and Limits of the World’s Most Active Judiciary,” in Donald W. Jackson & C. Neal Tate (eds.) *Comparative Judicial Review and Public Policy* (Greenwood Press, 1992).
- 7 “The world over, as also in our country, there is a rising demand for food-grains. This foretells the need for an intense focus on increasing agriculture productivity to ensure food availability, particularly of agricultural produces which are in short supply, to avoid spiraling food prices. To achieve this very important objective, I call for urgent steps towards a Second Green Revolution.” *Text of President Pratibha Patil’s speech*, Indian Republic Day, January 25, 2010. <http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/politics/text-of-president-pratibha-patils-speech_100309600.html#ixzzojoyv8VC5N>
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- 12 Darling, 208.
- 13 Newman, 10.
- 14 Punjab Human Development Report 2004, ch. 6, 111-42 (2004), available at <<http://data.undp.org.in/shdr/punjab/06-gender.pdf>>. P. 114.

- 15 Newman, 8.
- 16 The Official Site of the Nobel Foundation, "The Nobel Peace Prize 1970," <http://nobel-prize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1970/index.html> (accessed December 8, 2009).
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- 18 Cary Fowler and Pat Mooney, *Shattering: Food, Politics and the Loss of Genetic Diversity*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990), 56.
- 19 Newman, 9.
- 20 Ibid, 9.
- 21 Fowler and Mooney, 130.
- 22 Vandana Shiva, *The Violence of the Green Revolution*, (London: Zed Books, 1991), 174
- 23 G.S. Bhalla, *Green Revolution and the small peasant: a study of income distribution among Punjab cultivators*, (New Delhi: Concept Pub. Co., 1983), v.
- 24 Ibid 160.
- 25 Ibid, 160.
- 26 Ibid, 163.
- 27 Ibid, 162.
- 28 Ibid, 162.
- 29 United Nations Development Program, "Punjab Human Development Report," (2004), <<http://data.undp.org.in/shdr/punjab/06-gender.pdf>> (accessed December 8, 2009); Anita Gill and Lakhwinder Singh "Farmers' Suicides and Response of Public Policy: Evidence, Diagnosis and Alternatives from Punjab," *Economic and Political Weekly* 26 XLI (2006): 2764.
- 30 United Nations Development Program.
- 31 Dowry constitutes the giving of money and other goods by a bride's family to a groom's family. The practice is socially justified as the "last expense" a girl's parents must bear—after her marriage the girl becomes the "responsibility" of her husband's family. See, United Nations Development Program.
- 32 Newman, 26.
- 33 See, e.g., "PM pays tribute to Father of Green Revolution Borlaug," Press Trust of India (PTI), September 14, 2009; Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Remarks at the Foundation Stone Laying Ceremony of IISER (Sept. 27, 2006), available at <<http://pmindia.nic.in/speech/content.asp?id=399>>.
- 34 Shiva, 174; Author interview with Mr. Rajewal, Bhartiya Kisan Union, Chandigarh, Punjab, India, July 2009.
- 35 The majority community of Punjab but a minority religious and ethnic community in India, Sikhs constitute over 60% of the population of Punjab but less than 2% of the population of India. Census of India Website, "Census Data 2001 >> India at a glance >> Religious Composition," <http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/India_at_glance/religion.aspx> (accessed December 8, 2009).
- 36 Gurdev Singh, ed., *Punjab waters: SYL canal*, (Chandigarh: Institute of Sikh Studies, 2002).
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- 57 Author interview with farming family, village Chottiyan, 28 June 2009. On file with author.
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- 67 "Co-op meet: Badal blames Centre for non-cooperation," *Express News Service*, Feb. 10, 2009.
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- 69 In-person interviews with Mr. H. Dhaliwal, Tehsildar and Mr. S. Singh, DSP; telephone interview with D.C. V.K. Ohri. June 2009.
- 70 H.S. Shergill, *Economics of Food Self Sufficiency*, (Chandigarh: Institute for Development and Communication, 2008), 31.
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- 73 Punjab Chief Minister's comments to the same effect can be noted in "CM doles out Rs 555 cr for villages, towns," *Tribune News Service*, December 23, 2008.
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Senior Maoist 'arrested' in India," *BBC News*, 19 Dec 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7151552.stm>.

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79 Punjab Agricultural University.