Study Number - 183

Farmer Suicides in West Bengal







Study sponsored by Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare
Government of India, New Delhi

Agro-Economic Research Centre
(For the States of West Bengal, Sikkim and Andaman & Nicobar Islands)
Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan
West Bengal

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Preface

The present study entitled "Farmer Suicides in West Bengal" is an All India Coordinated Study and was undertaken at the instance of Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, Government of India, New Delhi. The task of coordination has been entrusted with Agricultural Development and Rural Transformation Unit, Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore.

Farmers' suicide is a social menace and a very sensitive issue in India that require immediate attention and sympathy of the policymakers for coping over with the situation at the earliest. The present study is an attempt to develop an in-depth understanding of agrarian distress and farmers' suicide in West Bengal and to make some policy suggestions to prevent such incidences in future. The study revealed that farmers' suicide in West Bengal is not necessarily linked with backward regions or crop failures due to flood or drought rather it is more common with market failure in cash crops that required substantial borrowing to purchase farm supplies. Low and insufficient income from the farming enterprises; increasing cost of living and lack of non-farm employment opportunities are the root cause of farmers' suicide though manifested by indebtedness and family related problems. Therefore, policies towards risk management in agriculture should not only address the climatic and financial risks but also risks associated with distress sale, sudden decline in price due to glut in the market, and income uncertainties. Development of rural infrastructure, particularly, irrigation, storage and cold chain system will help to mitigate risk to a large extent but this should go hand in hand with creating non-farm employment opportunities in the rural areas.

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) is the main official agency in the country responsible for collecting and analyzing crime data, including suicides. However, since 2014, the NCRB changed the methodology as well as parameters for compiling farmers' suicide related data. This change in parameters led to reporting zero farmers' suicide by as many as 12 States and 6 Union Territories including West Bengal in-spite of several news and media reports claiming farmer's suicides in these states. We have also approached the concerned Director, Government of West Bengal for information regarding farmers' suicides in the state but they too could not help us because of non-availability of data with them. Given such an obscure nature of data availability, as per instruction from the Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India and the coordinating centre, we conducted the study collecting information with our own sources following snowball sampling technique.

The task of completion of this study was assigned to Kali Sankar Chattopadhyay, as Team Leader, The study team consist of all the researchers in the Centre. Drafting and analysis of the report was done by the study team. During field survey he was ably assisted by Debanshu Majumder, Ashok Sinha, Vivekananda Datta, Ranjan Kumar Biswas and Debajit Roy. Debanshu Majumder, Debajit Roy and Ranjan Kumar Biswas assisted him during data entries and tabulation also. Typing of the report was done by Munshi Abdul Khaleque and Nityananda Maji. Secretarial

assistance was provided by D. Mondal, D. Das, P. Mitra and A.R. Patra. B. Singh and S. Hansda helped in the office maintenance.

We acknowledge the generosity of Prof. Swapan Kumar Dutta, Vice Chancellor (Officiating) Visva-Bharati, and Madam Ms. Sangeeta Verma, Economic and Statistical Adviser, Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, Government of India, New Delhi for their guidance and necessary support in completion of the study. We are also thankful to Dr. A. V. Manjunath (ADRTU, ISEC Bangalore) for his effective coordination of the study.

We are particularly indebted to Shri P. C. Bodh, Adviser (AER Division), Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, Government of India, New Delhi; Prof. Bidhan Chandra Roy, Professor of Agricultural Economics, and Prof. Amrit Sen, Professor of English, Visva-Bharati for their valuable suggestions and pain taking efforts in editing an earlier version of this report. A word of appreciation is also to Mr. Arunava Ganguly, Freelance Journalist, for his valued opinion and supplying information regarding farmers' suicide in the state and finally, we convey our sincere gratitude to the hundreds of villagers and bereaved family members of the victims for their ungrudging responses to our questions for the days together.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMERY

Background

Suicide of farmers is a social menace and a very sensitive and politically damaging issue in India that require immediate attention of the researchers and policymakers. Repeated incidence of farm suicides in some parts of the country, coupled with increasing media coverage, made it a social catastrophe and a drag on the quality of life of the farmers and their dependents. The present study is an attempt to look into the agrarian distress and farmers' suicides in the state of West Bengal and to prescribe policy measures to curb this social menace with the following specific objectives:

1. To analyze the incidence and spread of farmer suicides in selected states and to map the hot spots of suicide.

2. To study the socio-economic profile, cropping pattern and profitability of victim farm households.

3. To study the causes leading to farmers' suicides.

4. To recommend suitable policies to alleviate the incidence of farmers' suicides.

The study, confined to the state of West Bengal, is based on primary data collected from 30 farm household across three districts viz., Burdwan, Birbhum and North 24 Pargana. As there was no official records of farmers' suicide in West Bengal, snowball sampling technique was used to build up samples for this study. All the selected households were farmers, cultivating either their own land or on leased in land at the time of suicide. The reference period for data collection was 2015-16.

Major Findings:

The major findings of the study are summarized as below:

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

I. The incidence of farmers' suicide in West Bengal is lower than the national average and much lower as compared to several other states like Maharashtra, Telengana, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, etc. But the claim of 'zero farm suicides' as reported in the official documents does not match with the ground realities.

II. In contrast to popular perception, farmers' suicide in West Bengal is not linked with backward regions. Burdwan and Hoogly, two agriculturally developed districts, are the hot spot of farmers' suicide in West Bengal. This is mainly because the cropping pattern in these two districts is highly skewed towards potato and summer paddy. The level of crop diversification as well as livelihood diversification among the poor farmers is very low.

III. Farmers' suicide in West Bengal is not also necessarily linked with crop failures due natural disaster rather it is more common with market failure in cash crops that required substantial borrowing to purchase farm supplies. Most of the victims took loans to cultivate their land. But they did not get any remunerative price for their product which left them indebted without any prospect of repaying these loans. Driven to desperation and social embarrassment, they took their own lives.

IV. There are specific characteristics associated with farmers committed suicides, like those growing crops like potato or summer rice; those with very small size of land; those having no alternative sources of livelihood; those with long term illness; and those with borrowed a lot from non-institutional sources. The farmers with whom these three characteristics are most common had the highest suicide rates.

V. The causes of farmers' suicide in West Bengal are many. It is a complex interplay of social, economic, agro-climatic, political and psychological factors. But economic distress is the root cause.

VI. Income realized by the crop farmers in the study area is very low. Apart from very low income, increased cost of cultivation and rising cost of living particularly towards health care and meeting social obligations pushed the farmers to borrow.

VII. Lack of alternative livelihood options (other than wage earning within agriculture) for the poor is a major constraint in the study area leading to economic distress of the farmers. Farmers with alternative source of livelihood are able to cope with the crisis better. Therefore, sustainable rural livelihood diversification is needed.

VIII. A large number of farmers who committed suicide were indebted to money lenders at an exorbitant rate of interest and much of that indebtedness was due to low income vis-a-vis high cost of living. Too much reliance on non-

institutional sources of credit is a possible threat for the farming community in West Bengal.

IX. Another important matter of concern is wide spread drug addiction and alcoholism among the poor farmers. Though this is not only confined to the farmers alone, but poor and illiterate villagers are more prone to this, and in many times it escalates tension in the family.

X. Farmers' suicide in the study area made a devastating loss to the family of the victims and posed a large number of challenges that includes psychological depression, loss of livelihood, and increased financial and social insecurity.

Policy recommendations

The present farm crisis in West Bengal, calls for a multi-pronged solution that addresses major challenges faced by the farmers. Past agricultural policies, driven exclusively by food self-sufficiency related goals, offered limited scope to farm income and rural livelihood related concerns which has become prime concern now while pursuing sustainable agricultural development. Since economic distress is the root cause of farmers' suicide in West Bengal, immediate efforts are needed in the following dimensions to augment the income of farmers suffering from natural as well as market failure.

I. Policies towards risk management in agriculture should not only address the climatic risks but also risks associated with distress sale, sudden decline in price, farm credit, and income uncertainties. Development of rural infrastructure, particularly, irrigation, storage and cold chain system will help to mitigate risk to a large extent but this should go hand in hand with creating non-farm employment opportunities in the rural areas.

II. Since economic distress is the root cause of farmers' suicides in West Bengal, mere emphasis on compensation for crop loss or waiving loans can help only in the short run to mitigate the impact of farmers' suicide. A comprehensive package for long-term development of agricultural infrastructure and well as promoting agri-business activities can solve the twin problem of rural unemployment and low farm income.

III. Farmers should be encouraged for growing more diversified alternative remunerative cash crops rather sticking to the traditional ideas of cultivating only potato (during rabi season) or boro paddy (during summer). Small and

marginal farmers need to be encouraged to grow other remunerative crops like off-season vegetables, pulses and oilseeds.

IV. Sustainable rural livelihood diversification is a must. Government must take measures to increase non-farm employment opportunities in the rural areas. For this, both short term and long term interventions are needed to alleviate the farmers out of economic distress. Strengthening livelihood programmes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and promoting agri-business activities holds the key.

V. In order to protect the potato farmers from distress sale, the government must think of introducing some innovative procurement mechanisms (on the lines of MSP) for potato for their mid-day meal schemes and ICDS schemes. Timely intervention by the government for procurement, storage and export of potato can reduce the distress sale to a great extent.

VI. At the same time, as suggested by the National Commission on Farmers, higher MSP for all the major agricultural crops including paddy is very important. However, mere increase in MSP alone will not be sufficient unless there is commensurate improvement in the procurement infrastructure in the state which is very poor till date.

VII. Government must also ensure that the benefits from various schemes, targeted towards agriculture and rural development, actually reach the farmers. Proper care and adequate measures are needed while planning and implementing farmers welfare programmes like support price, procurement, crop insurance, crop loan, health insurance, etc so that the poor farmers does not face any entry barrier to take benefit from such schemes.

VIII. Public awareness programme regarding the ill effects of drug addiction and alcoholism is necessary. For this counseling services and establishment of rehabilitation centre can be of great help. At the same time revamping rural health facilities, which is severely inadequate in West Bengal, is also necessary to avert farmers' suicide to a great extent.

IX. Finally, there is a need to improve the quality of farm suicide data. The claim of ‘zero farm suicides’ in West Bengal as reported in the official documents does not fits well with the ground realities. The NCRB compiles these information from police records but without verifying the claims made by the police stations. Therefore, some alternative checks must be there to counter under reporting of farm suicide cases by the states.