

The Crisis of Farmers' Suicide in Odisha: A Human Rights Perspective

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Abstract

The issue of suicidal deaths has been recorded in agrarian India with varied cultural practices and farming patterns. High personal indebtedness of farmers stemming from changes in cropping patterns plant resistance to pesticides and hence increased spending on pesticides, a shift from low-cost food crops to high-cost cash crops, lack of access to institutional credit and a shift of government policy focus away from agriculture have been identified to contribute to the epidemic of farmers suicide. Farmers' suicide rising rate throughout India brought many adverse changes in India's farming community including increasing poverty and limited livelihood opportunity. This trend also continues in Odisha and the agrarian distress draws a negative impact on the farmers in entertaining fundamental human rights. In this context, the article seeks to explore the agrarian crisis in Odisha and how it contributes to their suicide. It also analyzes the role of the state and non-state actors in response with the problem of farmer suicide.

Key Words: Agrarian Crisis, Human Rights, Green Revolution, Suicide, Debt

Understanding Agrarian Crisis and Farmers' Suicide in India

The present agrarian crisis has its roots in the green revolution. The Green Revolution in India began in the mid-1960s marking a transition from traditional agriculture in India and introduction of high-yielding varieties of seeds and the associated agricultural techniques. The need for introducing the Green Revolution in India arose due to shortage of food-grains in part due to the legacy of colonial regime. The government of India wanted to make India self-dependent in terms of food-grain production and these efforts coincided with the development of high-yielding varieties of seeds of wheat developed by Norman Borleng and his associates in Mexico. These seeds also necessitated changes in farming

techniques such as the addition of fertilizers and pesticides and greater use of irrigation.

The green revolution did effectively solve India's food-grain shortage after it was introduced in India, although in second wave of the green revolution in the 1980s, there was however, a slight reduction in production as compared to the first wave. While green revolution addressed the issues of shortage of food to some extent. Scholars often cited the adverse ecological effects of the resources employed in growing high-yielding varieties of seeds such as fertilizers and pesticides. They also criticized certain socio-economic effects of the green revolution in India such as social conflict due to growing socio-economic divide. Although the green revolution in India started with great promise and made

immense contributions in boosting agricultural productivity with high-yielding seeds and introduction of new methods of agriculture in India. (Das, 2017)

The present agrarian crisis is an extension of the problems of green revolution. Agrarian distress and distress driven farmers suicide examined crop and region related specific factors, have lead the farmers to suffer humiliation and finally surrendering themselves to kill themselves have convincingly proved that trade liberalization led price fall for agricultural commodities, compounded further by the hike in production cost and total withdrawal by the concerned governments from procurement and market intervention have caused distress to the roots causing rural distress claiming thousands of lives across the country. The exact causes of agrarian distress may vary from one to another state but everybody agrees on the common causes i.e., external trade liberalization and neo-liberal policy driven reforms in the economy have divested the life of agrarian community who have embraced agriculture as their main occupation. On the other side, agrarian crisis linked with the other various reasons are like debt, crop failure and low return, drought, illness of family members, failure to marriage of daughters and lack of alternative sources of income etc. responsible for farmers' suicide.

In a nutshell, genetically-modified seeds have been claimed as the root cause for suicide crisis. Commercialization of agriculture has led to the indiscriminate use of fertilizers and pesticides, deteriorating soil quality and fertility, reducing ground water levels that afterwards making it

difficult to sustain regular agricultural output from land as well as with the cost of agricultural inputs increasing with each passing year and farmers have been forced to take credit from institutional and non-institutional sources. Therefore, high agricultural cost of production, less local prices for agricultural crops and the policies of the government have rendered the farmers more vulnerable than before and contributed to the tragic incident in the history of India. Regardless of many warnings of exports about the depressing predicament of agriculture, India has not responded with the same urgency, even the state governments have treated the issue as deserving nothing more than the routine development intervention based on stereotypes about rural life. (Rehman Farzana, 2012)

Farmers' suicide has been recorded from all over the country, but it has been mainly associated with Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Punjab and Odisha. In 1998, the structural adjustment policies like Monsanto which in turn has sublicensed its BT cotton gene to other companies and collects huge amount of money as a royalty from these companies. The farmers need more pesticides, fertilizers, electricity, water and labour continue to rise while the price of cotton has been declining coupled with decreased productivity. When crop failed in as a result of unpredictable weather conditions, farmers become unable to pay back his loans and took his own life by committing suicide.

Farmers' suicide in India is the most catastrophic and disastrous expression of human rights crisis faced by peasants. The spate farmers' suicides accompany India's

embrace of the brave new world of neo-liberalism where the number of farmers', having committed in India between 1995 and 2015 stands up to more than 25000. (Sainath, 2010) Apart from the suicides, there have been growing reports of hunger deaths in many parts of India, some of which have been documented and there is also evidence of very large-scale mass migration in search of work in rural India. The Indian government has failed to address the crisis, assess farmer suicide statistics, and properly estimate the problem as well as to provide immediate or long-run relief to the victims.

A number of studies reveal that the suicide rates are highest where cotton (one of the dominant cash crops of India) production is highest and it is noteworthy to mention that the cotton industry has been dominated mostly by foreign multinationals. Cotton also stands as a prime example of India's general move away from food production towards cash crop cultivation, a shift that has contributed significantly to farmer vulnerability as evidenced by the fact that the majority of suicides are committed by farmers in the cash crop sector. Multinational agribusiness corporations took advantage of India's new market liberalization and structural adjustment policies by aggressively promoting the introduction of genetically modified seeds into Indian agriculture. At the same time paddy cultivation also as, major agrarian sector in various parts of India. Due to the above reasons crisis of farmer suicide increases day by day. (Rehman Farzana, 2012)

Agrarian Distress and Farmers' Suicide in Odisha

Odisha is spread over 1,55,707 square km and has four distinct land types -- Northern Valley area, Eastern Ghats, Central Table Land and the Coastal Plains - which provide diversity in land types to encompass a larger agricultural diversity. The climatic conditions, land type, extent of rainfall and the local topography have shaped the 10 agro-climatic zones. Odisha receives enviable average annual rainfall of 1451.2 mms, which varies from district to district. Eighty per cent of the rain is received during the southeastern monsoon in four months (June-September). Even though the quantum of rainfall is quite high, its distribution during the monsoon period is highly uneven and erratic.

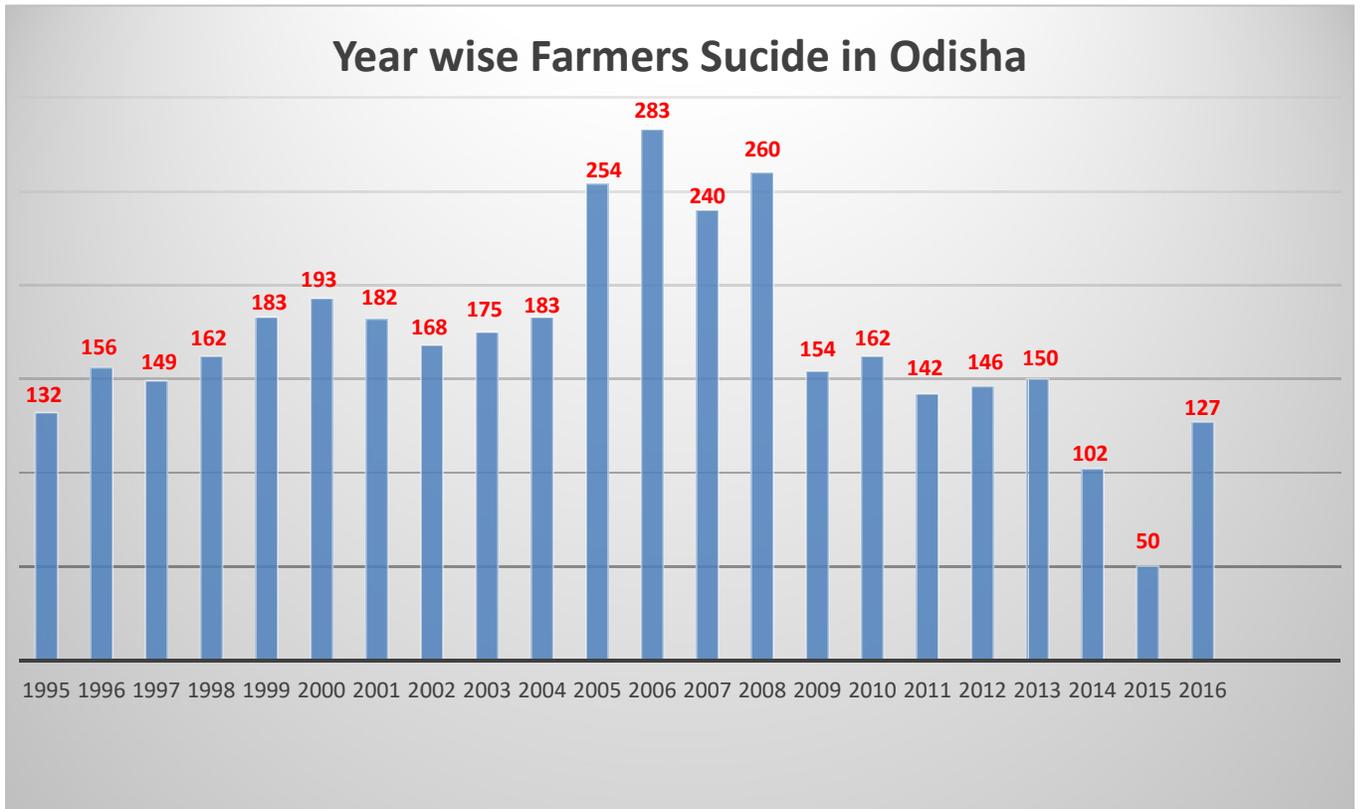
There has been a structural shift in Odisha's economy, particularly in terms of a sectoral shift, from agriculture to the industry, and service sectors in recent times. In 2014-15, the broad agriculture, industry and service sectors (as per CSO classifications) contributed about 15.4, 33.4 and 51.2 per cent to Odisha's GSDP. Agriculture's contribution to GSDP has been on the decline. Starting from a contribution of 58.3 per cent in 1950-51, it declined to 15.4 per cent in 2014-15. The sector provides employment and sustenance, directly or indirectly, to more than 60 per cent of the population. However, the sector suffers from frequent natural shocks like cyclones, droughts and flash floods affecting growth trends. Despite wide annual variations in its growth, the agriculture sector grew robustly in real terms at 2004-05 prices, at a rate of 12.30 per cent during 2012-13. This was

followed by a negative growth rate in 2013-14, mainly because of the cyclonic storm Phailin and flash floods in October 2013. However, as per advance estimates, the

agriculture and animal husbandry sector expect to grow at 1.97 per cent during 2014-15 (GOO, 2016).

Farmers' Suicide: A Recurring Phenomenon in Odisha Scenario

Table: 0.1



(Source: Various ADSI reports, NCRB)

Two decades back, while farmer suicides were being reported from states like Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, Odisha did not seem to be on the scanner of probable sites for this phenomenon. Farmers in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and other states were into cash crops like sugarcane and cotton and had huge debt burdens. On the contrary, the farmers in Odisha were into paddy cultivation and their outstanding loans were very low. But this assumption was proven wrong. During the first decade of the 21st century, quite a few farmers'

suicides were being reported mostly from the drought prone districts in the state -- Sambalpur, Bolangir, Kalahandi and Bargarhin its Western part. This was also the time when suicides by cotton farmers in Kalahandi and Bolangir districts came to the fore. More and more news about farmers' suicides started appearing in the media. Most of the farmers were paddy cultivators. Such a high number caught the attention of the vernacular and national media. The role of SHGs and microfinance institutions was questioned for the first time as, in many

cases, it was reported that coercion by SHGs and microfinance agencies had worked as a trigger for the farmers to end their lives. Two years later, also proved to be a drought year leading to farmers' suicides. This time questions were raised about the tenancy system in the state.

Bargarh district, known as the rice bowl of Odisha, has experienced the worst crisis. Huge acres of crops have been damaged by pests. The destroyed crops have been set on fire by many farmers. With the crops damaged, the burden of loan added to the distress of the farmers leaving them with no option but to commit suicide.

The enormity of the farmers' suicides is not new in Odisha. As per the official reports (Govt. of Odisha) between 1999 and 2015, 3602-odd farmers had committed suicide. In Sambalpur and Bolangir districts, 40 farmers had committed suicide in 2009. Between 2001 and 2010, over 2600 farmers had committed suicide in Odisha. Between 2005 and 2014, as many as 1895 farmers had committed suicide in the State. During the drought in 2015, 138 farmers had committed suicide across the State, of which 40 deaths were in Bargarh district alone. Around 150 farmers committed suicide in Bargarh in the last one year. In fact, the last few years have seen an increase in the number of farmers' suicides due to crop loss, increasing indebtedness, and utter distress. The 'Right to Food' campaign also ascertains that of the 30 suicide cases which were investigated in 12 districts of Odisha in 2016, 25 farmers had committed suicide due to crop failure and debts. The prolonged agrarian crisis has reached a torrid point as the total number of farmers' suicides rose to 13 in the last one

month. In Bargarh district, seven farmers have committed suicide by consuming pesticide/some poisonous substance, as the paddy grown by them was damaged by BPH. However, to view the increasing farmers' suicides as merely a situation of crop loss due to pest attack and indebtedness, is to have only a glimpse of the problem which is much deeper.

Understanding Farmers' Suicide in Western Odisha

In different districts of Western Odisha, farmers committed suicide day by day. This Kharif season, Brown Plant Hoppers (BPH) have been particularly pestilent towards destroying paddy crops in most of the districts of Western Odisha. Odisha's most of the regions are affected and it's a bigger crisis. Experiences of drought and unseasonal rain followed the pest attack, adding to the debt burden and distress of the farmers that is beyond comprehension.

Pradeep Khamari of Behera village under Khuntapalli panchayat of Bargarh, Kanhu Munda of Mundapada village under Maneswar block of Sambalpur district, and Manoj Singh from Kuanrkela village under Hemgir block in Sundargarh district, committed suicide by consuming pesticide/some poisonous substance due to damage of crops by pest attack. (*The Hindu*, 2017: 3) A day after, Jitendra Biswal of Bhanupur village of Balasore district also committed suicide allegedly due to crop loss caused by unseasonal rains.

In Bargarh district, Indra Bariha of Malamunda village in Gaiselet committed suicide and Jagdish Budek of Jalagarh in Paikmal committed suicide. Akshaya Dharai of

Sadashib Nagar in Tora also killed himself by consuming pesticide on October 30 as the paddy crop cultivated in nine acres of land was damaged due to pest attack. Subash Dhare, the deceased farmer's son, stated that his father had taken an agricultural loan of Rs 2 lakhs besides a loan for a power tiller. After the crop was affected by 'chakada'/'Matia Gundi' (brown insect that reduces crops to dust) (BHP), he was depressed and thus killed himself. Damaged crops and alleged debt burden also forced Brunda Sahu to set his paddy field on fire a day before he consumed poison on November 1. He had taken a loan of around Rs 5 lakhs to cultivate an area of 15 acres. (Mohanty, 2017) His daughter said that the pesticides, which failed to kill the insects, killed her father. During the last few days, several farmers in Bargarh, Jharsuguda, Nuapada, Ganjam, Sambalpur, Rayagada, Kalahandi and Gajapati districts set fire to their pest-infected crops.

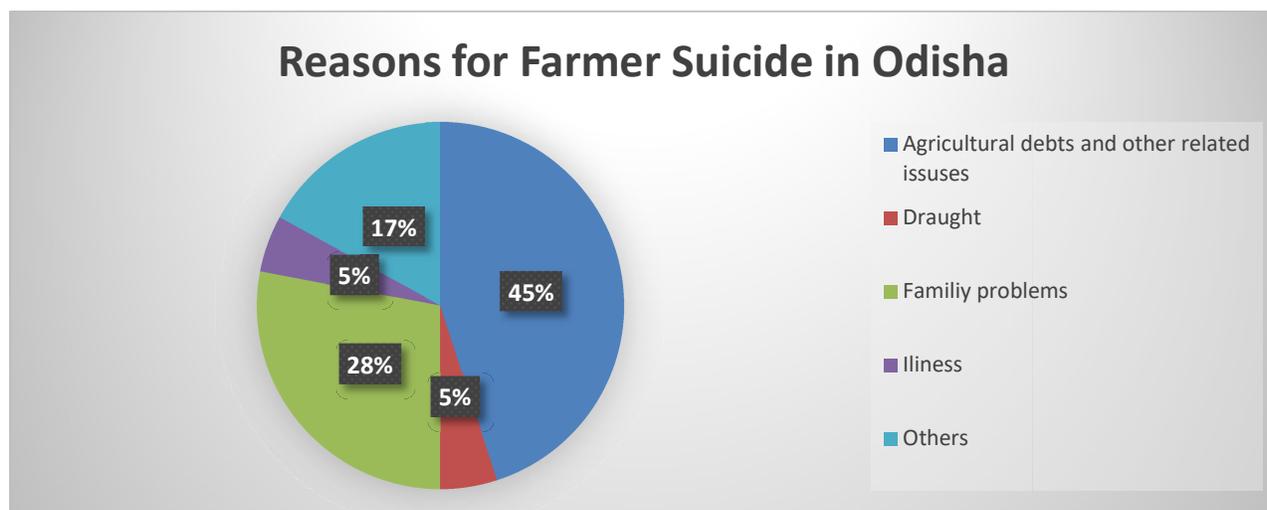
Earlier, unable to bear the crop loss due to pest attack in his 2.5 acres land, Alaya Jena of Arendra village under the Sanakhe-mundi block of Ganjam district, consumed poison. He died while undergoing treatment. Rajendra Bhuyan of Baulajholi village in the Kukudakhandi block of Ganjam district also committed suicide by consuming pesticide allegedly over crop loss due to the damage caused after incessant rainfall. As a sharecropper, he had borrowed a large sum of money from private lenders and was

reportedly under pressure of repaying the money.

In the past, Tarini Bariha, a landless cultivator from Barihapaali village of Bargarh district, had killed himself by consuming pesticide as his crop had failed. He was under enormous debt and was unable to pay Rs 2000 for his son's class XII exam. A few kilometers away, in the Sohela block, Makardwaj Wag also killed himself over debts from crop failure. These narrations are an everyday living experience for the landless, marginal and small farmers. The increasing dependence on the money lenders for credit are the consequential effects of enduring structural deprivation and oppression. (Ray Suranjita, (2017)

The experiences of landlessness, hunger, deprivation and distress of farmers in Western Odisha, need to be understood as sites of conflicts that are constant, palpable, and unceasing over time. They explain a genealogy of the historical, social, economic, political, and cultural reality that has witnessed the establishment of institutions/structures of dominance and practices of control. Certain sections/communities of society are subject to systemic deprivation, alienation, marginalization, impoverishment, exclusion, underdevelopment, and distress. Denial of rights of basic productive resources to the former has made the strategies to cope with crop loss, indebtedness, loss of land, and landlessness, difficult. While an increasing number of farmers' suicides aroused public outrage, we also see complicity with the incompetent state. (Ray Suranjita, (2017)

Understanding Farmers' Suicide: A Human Rights perspective



(Source: *ADSI reports*)

The notion of human rights is the most important one. It has gained global acknowledgement in the contemporary society. It is the most precious legacy of classical and contemporary human thought and has sought the attention of the people worldwide. While there is an increasingly widespread concern for universal respect and observance of human rights, gross violation of norms continues unabated in almost all parts of the world. Human dignity as the essence of the notion of human rights remains unchanged. It will continue to be so as long as people suffer from disease, hunger, lack of opportunities and denial of the most basic economic, social, political and civil rights. Thus, the challenge of violation of human rights faces the mankind in its stark nakedness. The challenge is global and embraces the whole mankind.

In that particular context farmer suicide and their violation of human rights in India is a bigger issue now a days. Indian government is obliged to prevent farmer suicides at the outset; because of that it cannot escape legal

obligation under national statutes and international human rights law to protect the right to life and security of its citizens.

As discussed in previous section, insufficient economic resources, unstable economic flows and asset losses have ultimately led as central in the analysis of farmers' suicide. Because of the acute indebtedness farmers are unable to live a life of dignity, exercise vital freedoms towards greater enhancements of life chances and leading a fulfilling life. India however by its constitution of 1949 is duty bound to protect its citizen from hunger and guard the right to adequate means of livelihood with references to economic, social and cultural values laid down in the Constitution towards securing justice in all respects, including social security for the agricultural sector. The fundamental rights guaranteed in the supreme law of India like, right to life in article 21 of Indian Constitution and equal protection of law have been violated that consequently impose hindrances upon human life and to preserve human dignity.

The fundamental state policy of India again requires the state to promote the welfare of the people by promoting a social order in which social, economic, and political justice is informed in all institutions of life.

In addition, India is a State Party to multiple international human rights treaties and has consistently been put on notice by United Nations bodies (e.g. Human Rights Council) that the human rights of farmers are at stake. India is a State Party of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), and ILO Conventions. It is corresponding duty bound to protect,

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promote, and respect human rights of all human beings including vulnerable populations under above said conventions. (Rehman Farzana (2012)

Odisha's agrarian crisis has multiple human rights dimensions. Widespread farmer suicides also signal a crisis of failure on the part of the Odisha government to live up to its obligations to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights, as required under international human rights law. The human rights framework provided below was developed through analysis of international human rights law, interpretations by international treaty bodies, and statements by United Nations special procedures mechanisms. The framework is not exhaustive; rather, it represents several of the most pertinent rights of cotton and paddy farmers, as well as other farmers who are affected by this agrarian crisis.

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