

# Agrarian Crisis, Women and Seasonal Migration



Source : [www.pinimg.com](http://www.pinimg.com)

## Agrarian crisis: An overview

- Agrarian crisis- symbolized by the continuing spell of farmer suicides in different parts of the country, growing indebtedness among the peasantry, distress-driven migrations, perpetual recession, sporadic protests, migrations and hunger deaths, delayed marriages, among other symptoms- has been a compelling political and economic story of the country in the past two decades.
- Between 1995 and 2015, close to 400,000 farmers have committed suicide in India, according to the National Crime Record Bureau's (NCRB) annual reports on the accidental deaths and suicides in India. According to the 1991, 2001 and 2011 census reports, 15 million farmers, mainly cultivators, quit agriculture between 1991 and 2011.
- Apart from fuelling rural-urban migration, the census reports also indicate a spurt in the numbers of landless labourers, indicating that the number of landless farm workers is spiralling along with fallowisation of land in some regions.
- There have been several studies to understand the agrarian crisis, farmer suicides, and growing chasm between urban and rural India, inequality, class divide and political factors. Almost all of them unanimously admit to three common factors: that the net rural incomes are falling, the per capita debts of farmers are increasing, that small and family farms are becoming unviable, non-remunerative. Neoliberal reforms have certainly accentuated the crisis.
- The Indian agrarian economy is in a state of stagnation. This stagnation and distress affecting agriculture in India has three dimensions: uninspiring growth, increased casualisation of agricultural workforce and small and marginal farmers committing suicides.
- The rise in small and marginal farmers has been the single most important feature of the current structure of Indian agriculture. Despite migration of rural workers, the number of small and marginal farmers has been on an increase. Even though

the per capita landholding size is decreasing, the overall share of operational holdings of the class in question is rising.

## **Farmer suicides in India**

- Farmer suicides are a combination of complex factors. Indebtedness incurred due to high capital intensive farming, leading to sale of assets, greater reliance on credit to repay old debts, increased debt burdens, crop failure due to higher dependence on nature, combined with glut in the market pushes the farmers to increased levels of risks. Studies have shown that farmers are engaging in high risk agriculture especially when they grow cotton.
- Reports indicate that most of the victims from the different states were marginal cultivators (less than 1 hectare) and small (1 to 2 hectares) cultivators, followed by semi-medium (2 to 4 hectares) cultivators. Compounding such economic marginality is the fact that a significant proportion of the victims were from the 'Backward Classes' or from lower ranked caste groups.
- A major social dimension that compounds the individualization of agriculture is that of the fragmentation of joint families into nuclear households. Bearing risks that arise from debts, growing new crops, or ensuring good sale prices are all burdens on a single individual.

### **Alone in her own shadow- July 2010, Kurzadi, Wardha, Maharashtra**

Looking back, Ujjawala Pethkar wonders how she survived the hard times! More than a decade after her farmer-husband, Prabhakar, took his own life to join a burgeoning list of farmers committing suicide in Vidarbha region of Maharashtra; the 40 year old farm widow is rebuilding the blocks of her life and family. She was in her early 30s when Prabhakar consumed insecticide to end himself. Responsibilities fell upon her: from tending to her farm to repaying debts to raising the two kids. She says, "If I do not work, my children would not have a future – I can toil any longer for them."

Alone in her own shadow, Ujjawala is the struggling yet resolute face of the struggling farm widows. Ujjawala's husband ended himself in 2003, when the cotton crisis in Vidarbha was still unfolding. "Agriculture is not women friendly," Ujjwala says.

"When I go to a bank, clerks don't take me seriously; when I go to market, men stare at me as if an outsider has intruded their bastion," she says. "Farm labourers, even women, don't come to my farm easily." Losses and debts killed her husband. "Two lakh rupees was our debt when he passed away," she says.

"I am repaying the loans part by part; have to repay more than a lakh rupees to private

lenders and the banks. Death is not the way out of crisis. My husband killed himself without thinking about us,” she says.

## **Women in agriculture**

- Women play a crucial role in agricultural development and allied fields including in the main crop production, livestock production, horticulture, post-harvest operations, agro/social forestry, fisheries, etc (NCW 2001).
- The Census 2011 report says that of the total female main workers, 55% were agricultural labourers and 24% were cultivators. However, only 12.8% of the operational holdings were owned by women, which reflect gender disparity in ownership of landholdings in agriculture (Economic Survey 2017-18).
- The lack of titled land prevents them from accessing a number of further benefits that they should be able to enjoy, such as access to institutional credit, bank loans and federal agricultural benefits.

## **Impact of agrarian crisis on women farmers**

- Krishnaraj and Shah (2004) state that the face of farmer in India is female, emphasizing the centrality of women’s work in agriculture, their heavy work burdens and unequal returns to their labour.
- The out-migration of men to urban areas and non-farm sector in search of better livelihood options resulted in women being left behind to work in agriculture both as workers and farm managers. It is interesting to note that agricultural distress on the one hand is ‘pushing men out of agriculture’, and on the other hand ‘pushing women within agriculture’.
- Whenever agricultural distress hits any region, first victim is the women; it affects them in several ways- increased work burden, higher debt-repayment burden, and reduced consumption and less spending on healthcare. Agriculture in this era of globalization is undergoing a number of changes and most of it impacts women who are sole principal earners of their households, especially widows surviving farmer suicides.
- In the study conducted by Chari-Wagh (2012-2014) on the coping strategies of the widow farmers, in Wardha district of Maharashtra, it was observed that the coping mechanisms adopted by the widow farmers to deal with their situations of distress included three important measures:
  - Engaging in multiple paid labours.
  - Austerity measures such as reduction and prioritizing of needs.
  - Investing in creating a livelihood future that does not depend on agriculture.

- Itishree Pattnaik and Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt argue, “Feminization of agriculture, as it is occurring in India, is adding to the already heavy work burdens of most rural women and thereby further undermining their well-being, and is better described as the feminization of agrarian distress.”
- Feminization of agriculture in India is not a new phenomenon. In the present agrarian context of declining farm incomes and stagnation of employment, it has gained importance.
- On the contrary, Hardikar (2004) argues that the insides from the micro study in two villages of Madhya Pradesh note that migration of males puts further pressure on women employers as they lose family labour and there is an increase in the upward pressure on wages.
- This in turn forces women cultivators to abandon their farms since they can't afford to pay good wages to the remaining labour despite good monsoons. Therefore, the mere increase in number/time/activity of women in agricultural fields need not necessarily be called ‘feminization of agriculture’, as it may only signify the addition of extra burden on women, thereby, causing them more disadvantage.

#### **At a ‘100 day site’, the elderly battle drought - July 2017, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu**

It was a group almost entirely of women, most of them in their 60s, holding axes and spades. Most of them were frail and fatigued. All were from landless or marginal farm households, and belonged to economically backward castes or were Dalits. There were a few old men too. Their dues had not been paid by the state government for 2-3 months. A few told the amounts owed to them ranged from Rs. 10,000 to Rs 15,000. Keelathirupanthuruthi is one of several hundred villages in the heart of the once-fertile Cauvery delta- a region that today stands ravaged amid a biting drought.

In 2016, the July-September southwest monsoon in the Cauvery delta registered a shortfall, as did the northwest monsoon from October to December. Crop yields dropped sharply, so did incomes and work.

“The last two years,” the women told, “have been bad for farming.” Canals and rivers did not bring in water, the monsoons failed, bore wells ran dry and the agrarian system collapsed. “The only support is this 100-day work,” said one woman. “There is no cash in our hands.” The Tamil Nadu government has hiked the MGNREGA work days to 150 in these parts. Each member at the worksite will earn Rs. 120-150 a day for 150 days, said Ananthi. But payments are being delayed.