

Peasant's Suicides in Punjab is a Scar on State and Civil Society

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Abstract

Suicides among the peasants in Punjab have been taking place in a systematic way since 1990 onwards. There are quite a number of studies on suicides which have established that suicides have been taking place among the peasants in Punjab in different regions but the Malwa Region particularly the districts of Sangrur, Mansa and Bhatinda affected much. Most of these studies have also categorically emphasized that the phenomenon of suicides is much higher among the agricultural labourers, marginal peasants and small peasants and less among better of farmers. It would therefore be appropriate to characterize it as "Peasants suicides". The government of Punjab has itself got conducted three studies, two by the Institute of Communication and Development and one by Punjab Agricultural University. All these three studies have pointed out those suicides have been taking place in Punjab for last two decades and that the rate of suicide has been high from 1995 onwards. The study of Punjab Agricultural University is a departure from other studies as it is the first census survey of peasant's suicides in the districts of Sangrur and Bathinda. Dr. Swaminathan, the distinguished the Agricultural Scientist had also suggested for a census survey of Farmers' suicides. Astonishingly the Punjab Government has been reluctant to accept the findings of the Research Institutes and Farmers' Commission of Punjab. It has also not publicly accepted the findings of Punjab Agricultural University which has come out with concrete figures of peasant's suicides in the state. Some of the civil society activists have being compelled to file a write petition in the Punjab and Haryana High Court to give direction to Punjab Government to accept the Human Rights of the peasants who have committed suicides and to provide compensation to them. Even in this case the Punjab Government has taken an evasive posture that it will look into the payment of compensation only after conducting the survey of peasant's suicides in all the 20 districts of Punjab.

The scholars of Punjab including the farmer's commission have established through their researches of the heavy debts through which the Punjab peasants are burdened. Punjab Government has not yielded to the basic Human Rights of the peasants. The researcher also conducted the Ph D research work of all the three regions (Majha, Malwa and Doaba) regarding the causes of peasant's suicides and role of civil society.

KEYWORDS: Peasant's Suicides, Green Revolution, Debt on Farmers, Dunkel Proposals, Majha Malwa and Doaba, good governance, civil society.

Introduction: The art of 'good' governance in the changed scenario of liberalization, privatization and globalization lay in making structural adjustments in the state regulated welfare economy to make it market friendly and profit oriented globalized economy without compromising its human face. The concept of good governance is involved the high degree of participation of civil society in governance. The present research paper

poses some fundamental research questions in the minds of social scientists and the researcher tried his level best to answer the questions. The Green Revolution, Dunkel Proposals, Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation created an atmosphere of heavy debts on peasants where landless labourers, marginal and small peasants were compelled by the circumstances to commit suicides. Thousands of innocent peasants are committing suicides where no signs of god governance, intervention of civil society, Punjab state's commitment to protect the human rights and protect peasant's right to life guaranteed under art 21 under fundamental rights in Indian Constitution.

Punjab despite being is good in terms of per capita income, Higher in literacy rate, socially and culturally upright but could not develop as a civil society which could respect and honour the human rights of every citizen. Numerous cases of human rights violation are being reported in Punjab. It may be the violation of human rights of migratory labourers or of the dalits or of the persons belonging to weaker sections of the society. It may be the violation of human rights of the women in form of female feticide or declining female ratio or the children or of the aged persons. Punjab is also known for its police atrocities or brutalities. We noticed the elimination of the thousands of innocent persons as cremations of unclaimed bodies by Punjab police during militancy period in Punjab. State has sponsored state terrorism which caused numerous violations of human rights. The extremists also violated the human rights of innocent people during the years of militancy in Punjab. Kidney scam also makes us realize the low status of Punjab in regard to human rights. The forced labour, child labour and honour killings are also some of examples of violations. Here we are taking a serious note of the violation of human rights of Punjab Peasants. An estimate indicates around 2600 suicides in 600 villages whereas Punjab has 12000 villages. A single village in Sangrur District reported 83 suicides.

The purpose of the paper to sensitize the social scientist on certain questions like:

- Why Punjab is losing its number one position in per capita income?
- Is there exist good governance in Punjab?
- Could the people of Punjab create Civil Society?
- Does civil Society play its role in Punjab?
- The affirmative action of the state does encourage the peasant to commit suicides?
- Does civil society and state protect the lives of innocent peasants?
- If, the state policies are root cause of the economic distress of peasants which compel the peasants to commit suicides, who could be sued for abatement to death.

Having distinction of being the pioneer of Green Revolution, Punjab is facing stagnancy in agriculture production and constant decline in primary sector's share in state GSDP. According to Economic Survey of the state, contribution of primary sector (which comprises mainly agriculture and allied activities) in the GDP of state is continuously declining since 2004-05 when it was 32.67% and it is likely to come down to 21.83% in 2012-13(advance estimates), despite of the fact that majority of the population are dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. Further, the GSDP from primary sector is expected to decline to Rs. 35,934 crore in 2012-13 showing a negative growth of

0.34%, over the previous year. While, at constant prices 2004-05, the GSDP from primary sector, which comprises mainly of agriculture and livestock activities, would be Rs.36,058 crore during 2011-12 (quick estimates). It is worth mentioning that the economy of the Punjab is largely dependent on agriculture and the state has contributed to the central pool significantly towards strengthening India's self-sufficiency. During 2011-12(P), 38.7% wheat and 22.1% rice to the central pool was contributed by the state. Though the state is the pioneer of Green Revolution in the country and is among top ranking states in terms of per capita income and high monthly per capita expenditure, yet to continue to face certain problems.

High Incidence of Debt on Farmers:

After Green Revolution cost of cultivation under high yielding varieties agriculture continued to increase while productivity or hectare stagnated in case of major crops, as a result the majority of cultivators are cash strapped. In addition to it, financial position of rural families is upset either due to crop failure or high expenditure on social ceremonies such as marriage, birth or death. This is reflected in huge debt burden on farmers. As per NSSO survey, the peasantry of Punjab is most heavily burdened in the country next to Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. The rural debt in Punjab is estimated to be more than Rs. 35000 Crore which has resulted in farm suicides. As per the latest survey conducted by Punjab Agriculture University, Ludhiana, about 5000 farmers and farm labourers have committed suicides during the last 10 years. The high debt burden on small and marginal farmers has destroyed many and they have had either to sell or mortgage their land. This has ultimately triggered instances of suicide by many farmers.

Though the interrelationship of civil society and the state is part of political science discourse since the emergence of the modern state, the association of civil society with governance is not old. In fact, the very idea of governance signifies that the state alone cannot be the sole manager of public affairs, but other actors of civil society should be included in the process. This relationship of civil society with the process of governance is associated with the new wave of democracy. It is beyond doubt that the concept of governance has widened the scope of civil society in public affairs.

Most discussion on the definition of good governance is based on making institutions and rules more effective and efficient. The objective is to achieve equity including gender equity, transparency, participation, responsiveness, accountability, rule of law and respect for human rights. Broadly speaking, it involves making operative the normative standards of democratic governance at local, regional, national and international levels. India's tryst with governance, carrying forward the strands of its illustrious civilization, in the post independence period began with the adoption of the Constitution and implementing the promises made therein.

Looking back in time, Preamble to the Constitution of India can be seen as an embodiment of what is nowadays understood as good governance. The paradigm shift in politico-economic policies in 1990s could not have altered its commitments to sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic and republic India. It could not have undermined the relevance of the principles of liberty, equality, fraternity and dignity of individual in

conformity with the human rights framework while securitizing an integral India. The art of 'good' governance in the changed scenario of liberalization, privatization and globalization lay in making structural adjustments in the state regulated welfare economy to make it market friendly and profit oriented globalized economy without compromising its human face.

But the era of LPG had not only dehumanize the individual and converted him into a self centered person rather than social entity. The reductions in subsidies meant for agriculture resulted into the heavy indebtedness of farmers. This whole phenomenon brought an atmosphere where landless labourers, marginal and small peasants were compelled by the circumstances to commit suicides.

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Punjab despite being is good in terms of per capita income, Higher in literacy rate, socially and culturally upright but could not develop as a civil society which could respect and honour the human rights of every citizen. Numerous cases of human rights violation are being reported in Punjab. It may be the violation of human rights of migratory labourers or of the dalits or of the persons belonging to weaker sections of the society. It may be the violation of human rights of the women I form of female feticide or declining female ratio or the children or of the aged persons. Punjab is also known for its police atrocities or brutalities. We noticed the elimination of the thousands of innocent persons as cremations of unclaimed bodies by Punjab police during militancy period in Punjab. State has sponsored state terrorism which caused numerous violations of human rights. The extremists also violated the human rights of innocent people during the years of militancy in Punjab. Kidney scam also makes us realize the low status of Punjab. The forced labour, child labour and honour killings are also some of examples of violations. Here we are taking a serious note of the violation of human rights of Punjab Peasants. An estimate indicates around 2600 suicides in 600 villages whereas Punjab has 12000 villages. A single village in Sangrur District reported 83 suicides.

In the history of mankind perhaps the first ever foundation stone was Magna Carta of 1215 which granted an individual the right to life. "No persons shall be taken or imprisoned, diseased or cut awed or exiled or anyway destroyed save—by the law of land"¹. All the efforts of mankind resulted into the declarations of human rights under UN charter in 1948. These human rights also granted the right to life to an individual. Its article 3 illustrates that everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of the person. The right to life describes the physical right over one's body. The right to life is the right to be able to live, both in sense of not being killed and being provided with sustenance to stay alive. The right to life, the most fundamental right to all treaties concerning human rights bound the state to protect the life of individual. Right to security is also granted

under art 25 which illustrates that everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well being of himself and of his family including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary soil service and the right to the security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood. By implementing human rights commitments Indian constitution provided its citizens some fundamental rights and directive principles of state policy. The art 21st of the fundamental rights guarantees protection of life and personal liberty except according to the procedure established by law². Again right to life is secured by the Indian constitution by the judicial protection of habeas corpus under art 32 and 226.

After independence India was not self reliant in agriculture products. India was bound to import food grains from foreign countries on unusual conditions to meet out its domestic needs. It was our nation's requirement that India should be self reliant in agricultural products. To acquire self reliance India introduced new scientific temperament to agriculture. India initiated Green Revolution in mid sixties has brought for reaching changes in the agriculture and rural areas of Punjab. The introduction of new technology with high-yielding variety of crops requiring large use of chemicals, fertilizers, insecticides, weedicide, pesticide, and many other inputs purchased from the market has increased the integration of agriculture into market framework to a fairly high level. This tremendous increase in the field of agricultural production has also brought about a great change in the very nature of agriculture. Since then all the farmers with differences only in degree have introduced new technology which put the entire peasantry into the market nexus. All farmers have to sell a part of output for purchase of the inputs. Therefore prices of agricultural products and inputs are a matter of serious concern to all categories of farmers. They have to make substantial investment in the agricultural machinery implements and also on the other inputs.

Since then the Indian Governments accepted the Dunkel Proposals and signed WTO which caused for reaching effects on peasantry. The subsidies earlier meant for agriculture, are being gifted to corporate sector now. In the era of LPG (Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation) Punjab shifted its affirmative policy of subsidies. Now states are ready to provide subsidies to corporate sector than to the peasants or poor people the recent example of issuance of Ordinance by NDA Government regarding acquiring of agriculture land of peasants. With the help of state, corporate sector acquired land for agriculture purposes to evade taxes and purchase land on concessional rates to establish their ventures and sell plots on hefty rates. The Punjab state is helping the corporate sector on the behest of public interest. On the recommendation of the Sen Committee government is thinking to scrap 'Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices'. The remunerative prices of wheat, paddy and sugarcane and virtually jammed with a meager increase. The government has little control over the rates of agricultural inputs, implements and other necessities of social life. The Govt. has no control on the interest rates of ahrityas (commission agents). Due to these policies of the government the peasants are reeling under heavy debts and not in a position to repay loans of arhitiyas, money lenders, land development banks, co-operative societies, commercial banks etc. This gloomy situation compelled the peasants of number of states like Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Orissa, and Punjab etc. to commit mass suicides.

Various parts of rural India including Punjab has witnessed an unprecedented phenomenon which may be well described as murder in suicide of thousands of farmers some of them known for their relatively better economic performance in conventional terms. It shook the conscience of the nation but without any perceptible impact on and response from the Government either at the union or state level. Perhaps ML Darling³ described the fate of Indian farmers “they are born in debt, live in debt and leave the burden of debt for their progeny”. Till now agriculture has been a gamble in monsoon and other natural calamities. The condition of peasant is unbearable and un-repayable burden of debt, denial of loan by co-operative societies, loot of ahrityas, successive failure of crops, inability to come out of financial crunch are reported to be the cause which drove these God-fearing honest farmers to utter despair and frustration with life itself. Perhaps Hobsbawn in his history of twentieth century rightly maintained that the peasantry is one of the two groups of the people (other being housewives) that can no longer be found in the rich industrialized countries of the west.

Size Classes and Indebtedness of Punjab Farmers⁴

Sr. No	Size Classes	Total Debt.(Crores) Rupees	Debt per Operated Acre (Rupees)
1	Small up to 5 Acres	1229.58 (21.57)	10,105
2	Semi-Medium (5-10 Acres)	1651.31 (28.97)	7,941
3	Medium (10-15acres)	1694.49 (29.72)	4,228
4	Large (Above 15 acres)	1125.53 (19.74)	4,230
	All Holdings	5700.91	5,721

Note: Figures in parent theses are percentages.

In Punjab, average agriculture units below ten acres of land are 90% and below five acres of land are 75% and peasants up to ten acres of land hand had debt almost above 50%. The capacity of these peasants to repay the loan is lesser and they were compelled by the circumstances to commit suicides. The numbers of surveys were conducted by Govt. officials, some scholars and social activists such as Sh. Hardev Arashi⁵ and Inderjet Singh Jaijee,⁶ ‘Movement Against State Repression’, Dr. Gopal Krishan Ayer⁷ and Mehar Sigh Manick, ‘A Comparative Study of Farmer’s Suicides in Punjab and Andhra Pradesh’ Dr. Sucha Singh Gill,⁸ ‘Economic Distress and Suicides in Rural Punjab’, Govt. Official Mr. Bhalla,⁹ ‘Suicide in Rural Punjab’ IDC Chandigarh and prestigious journalists of leading Newspapers like The Tribune, The Indian Express, The Hindustan Times, The Hindu etc. conducted the surveys and reported farmers suicides in Punjab in general and Malwa region (Bathinda, Mansa and Sangrur Districts) in particular. During my Ph.D. research¹⁰ I also conducted the survey in 2005-06 which brought out that economic factors/distress have been primarily responsible. It is also observed that pauperisation and marginalisation led to the suicides. This was followed by crop failure

and social factors like poverty and unemployment are also the other factors. Alcoholism, drug addiction and marital tensions were also one of the factors of suicides.

The farmers of the Punjab had debt of Rs.5701 crores in the year 1998-99. During the year 2008, it touched the figure of around 30,394 Crores. The total indebtedness of Punjab farmers in 2011-12 could be close to Rs 40,000 crore on which the interest burden alone could be well imagined. Many studies suggest that agricultural indebtedness has been incurred because of unproductive expenditure on religious and social ceremonies, such as construction of houses, community dinners, marriage, birth and death ceremonies. Money lenders and commission agents are the major credit agencies for these short-term loans. They charge very high rate of interest from the farmers. The loans are also provided on the sale-agreement of land. Even the borrowers are compelled to buy the agricultural inputs from the specified shops. On the other hand, they may approach formal agencies only for long- term borrowings. The availability of easy credit from the institutional or non-institution

Some studies bring out that the suicide cases among landless labourers, marginal and small peasants are prevalent in all the three regions of Punjab i.e. Majha Malwa and Doaba. These cases are predominantly caused by economic distress and indebtedness. The highly commercialized agriculture accompanied by spirit of individualism and decline of traditional social support mechanism and non-existence of formal safety system have pushed several rural poor into suicides when faced with acute economic hardship and indebtedness along with social and family pressures with them.

To deal with the suicides Punjab government decided to give compensation of 2 lakhs to aggrieved families in 2007 but ultimately decided by Honorable Punjab and Haryana High Court in February 2015 that a five member committee will decide the fate of suicide. The family of deceased will get Rs 50000 in cash to refund the loan and 1, 50000 will be deposit in savings and interest of the amount shall be paid as pension to the survivals of deceased.

But this policy of the state perhaps may encourage the peasant to commit suicides so that the economic conditions of the family will be strengthening afterwards. What a pity the compensation is being given after the death of a peasant and not earlier to save the lives of peasants. This amount could be used to waive the loans or in form of subsidies to save the human rights of peasants. At the same time the debts of traders, big businessmen and industrialists are being waived why the loans of the peasants cannot be waived?

It is pertinent to mention here that peasants of Punjab were doing agriculture in subsistence manners earlier than the Green Revolution. They were lesser dependent on market forces because agriculture was a profession of more or less of self reliant. But it was our national requirement that India was not self reliant in food grains. It was our national interests which compelled us to introduced scientific temperament to agriculture to acquire self reliant in agricultural products. The initiation of Green Revolution put the peasantry into market nexus. The Green Revolution enabled Punjab, once a deficit state in food, to become a major surplus in food grains. The Punjab produced only 3.29 million tons of good grains in 1966 and crossed the 9.21 million mark in 1976-77 (a threefold increase in one decade). Because of governmental policies and particularly after Dunkel Proposals and WTO regime peasant are reeling under heavy debts and committing suicides in numbers of Indian states including Punjab. It is a well established fact that agriculture is not a profitable profession in the whole world. Only in the developed

countries like Europe agriculture is survived because of heavy subsidies which amounted above 70%. Since India signed the WTO it reduced the subsidies meant for agriculture which otherwise could be enhanced as per WTO to the maximum limit of 10% because India at that time was providing subsidies up to 04% only. The reduction of subsidies ultimately resulted into economic distress of peasants. The economic distress is a major cause of suicides among peasants. When at dire needs the peasants came to rescue to acquire self reliant in food grains, now it is the duty of the Nation as well as of Civil Society to come to the rescue of peasants to save Human Rights and their Life.

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