

# FARMER'S DISTRESS AND AGRARIAN CRISES IN INDIA: CAUSES AND WAYS FORWARD

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## ABSTRACT

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*Agriculture in India is referred to as “Gamble of the monsoon”. It has been observed that among Indian states. In recent years, many farmers in India have committed suicide, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Karnataka record for high suicide rates due to indebtedness of agricultural households. Maharashtra accounted for the maximum share of farmer suicides and Karnataka second. Cultivators are more prone to commit suicide compared to that of Agricultural Labourers. The study found that the high poverty states have the highest farmers committing suicide. Among the cultivators, bankruptcy or indebtedness are the major factors leading to purposive killing of farmers killing themselves. The study is based on secondary data. The data such as number of cultivators, agricultural labourers by age, gender and size of landholdings have been collected and been used for further analysis. Indian States are categorized into low, middle and High Poverty states based on ‘combined poverty line’ estimated by Suresh Tendulkar. Also the farmers are divided into four groups according to size of landholdings (marginal, small, medium and large farmers) for clear analysis. Simple statistical tools such as averages, Coefficient of Variation and percentage are used to analyze and interpret the data. Out of 39.8 percent of total working population in India 21.7 percent of population are engaged in agricultural activities and are in distress and committing suicide which triggers a major loss to India’s Human Capital resource. The study also shows that high rates of suicide are recorded in Maharashtra (34.1 percent) and Karnataka (12.5 percent) and therefore farmers’ suicide is high among the high poverty states of India.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Agriculture, Farmers, Cultivators, agricultural Labourers, Suicide, Bankruptcy, High and Low Poverty States, Factors.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The country India is home to vast agro-ecological diversity. It contributes about 25% to the total global production and consumes 27% of world’s consumption and imports 14% of pulses in the world. India is the world’s largest producer of milk (167 MT annually), pulses and jute, and ranks as the second largest producer of rice, wheat, sugarcane, groundnut, vegetables, fruit and cotton. It is also one of the leading producers of spices, fish, poultry and livestock and plantation crops. Worth \$ 2.1 trillion, India is the world’s third largest economy after the US and China. (Nations, 2017-18) In India service sector is playing a major role in moving the economy towards development by contributing about 54.40% to the total GDP second is by

Industrial sector (23%) and least is by Agriculture Sector (15.4%) and on the other hand out of total workforce in India 31.01%, 24.47% and 44.52% are employed in Service sector, industrial sector, agriculture sector respectively. Controversial arguments are on agriculture sector, 70% of rural households depend upon agriculture for their livelihood out of which 82 percent of them are small and marginal farmers, but contribution to GDP is only 15%. And thus special attention is to be given on the welfare of this crowd of workforce. It is estimated that more than a quarter of a million Indian farmers have committed suicide in the last 16 years the largest wave of recorded suicides in human history. A great number of those affected are cash crop farmers and cotton farmers in particular. The highest numbers of farmer suicides were

recorded in 2004 when 18241 farmers committed suicide. In 2009 alone, the most recent year for which official figures are available, 17,368 farmers committed suicide that's one farmer every 30 minutes. (CHR&GJ, 2011). In 2015, the National Crime records Bureau of India reported 12602 farmer suicides it was accounting for 9.4percent of total suicides victims (1, 33,623) in the country.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Parvathmma (2016) has offered various reasons to explain as to why farmers commit suicide in India. The study shows debt burden and greater reliance on informal sources of credit as one of the major reasons for suicide. The study is based on extensive review of literature on various aspects and regions of India. The study has also analyzed the reports of government and its policies to control the farmer's suicide. Also has made an international comparison where in many of the developed nations identified farming as a high stress profession that is associated with a higher suicide rate the general population. Guha,( 2012), has looked onto several compounding factors like political, economic and social reasons that influence the decision of the farmers to commit suicide. A discussion of the national level factors follows, including government (national and state) policies as well as NGO's involvement, and also health issues. Local level factors succeed this, including weather, water, soil, and social issues. The paper then moves into a constructive section, by presenting suggestions for alleviating farmer suicides taken from previously done studies by scholars. Thomas & De Tavernier (2017) has made an extensive review of literature and on basis of qualitative research the researchers have tried to introduce the debate on farmer's suicide and role of bio-technology. The article has reviewed and evaluated the multifaceted contentions of both opponents and defenders. The increased production cost; the insufficient crop-yield and financial returns. The article concludes by proving that, by the time India adopted Bt. cotton, hybrid cultivation had already proven detrimental and provided fodder to the critics, and blames the Indian Government in sufficiently addressing the crises. The advocacy of organic farming techniques, an increase in insurance schemes, and the creation of community groups for farmers all would have a positive impact on a farmer's livelihood are its major suggestions.

This present study focused on the scale and intensity of farmers committing suicide in India and also to identify the factors contributing to the farmers' suicides in India. The data such as number of cultivators, agricultural labors by age, gender and size of landholdings have been collected and analyzed for two groups of states based on poverty line which is not found in other literatures.

## 3. OBJECTIVES

- To examine the trends in the farmers suicide in India and know the present scenario.
- To make a comparative analysis on intensity of farmers suicide between high poverty and low poverty regions
- To analyze the factors contributing to farmers suicide in India.
- To make policy suggestions for reducing farmers suicide in India.

## 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is based on secondary data. The raw data are collected from the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare Department of Agriculture New Delhi and Annual Reports of National Crime Records Bureau of India. The data such as number of cultivators, agricultural labourers by age, gender and size of landholdings have been collected and been used for further analysis. Indian States are categorized into low, middle and High Poverty states based on 'combined poverty line' estimated by Suresh Tendulkar. For low Poverty 0 to 10, Middle Poverty 10 to 20 and High Poverty are 20 above. Low Poverty States are Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Jammu & Kashmir, Andhra Pradesh, and Goa. The Middle Poverty States are Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh, West Bengal, Tripura, Mizoram, Uttar Pradesh, Sikkim, Haryana, Manipur, and Orissa. High Poverty States are Nagaland, Kerala, Uttarkhanda, Maharashtra, Assam, Punjab, Bihar, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Karnataka, and Chhattisgarh. Also the farmers are divided into four groups according to size of landholdings (marginal, small, medium and large farmers) for clear analysis. Simple statistical tools such as averages, Coefficient of Variation and percentage are used to analyze and interpret the data.

## 5. RESULT DISCUSSIONS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

The discussion below is made fewer than three major heads like Pattern of Workforce, Indebted Agricultural Households, suicide scenario in India since 1995 and Major Factors Influencing Farmers Suicide.

### 5.1 Pattern of Workforce in India

India is the second largest in terms of population, since 1951 census the population has increased from 36 Cr to 121Cr within 6 decades. The share of rural population to total population has been declining for the same period from 82.7 percent to 68.9percent. Still India is an agrarian country with about 70% of its population depending on Agriculture. The study observes a increasing trend in total workers and a decreasing trend in total agricultural workers because of unpredictable profits in agriculture sector, yet more than half (21.7percent) of total working population (39.8 percent) is still depending on agriculture for livelihood. Out of total agricultural workers cultivators are decreasing and agricultural laborers are increasing as agricultural land is continuously decreasing due to various reasons like uncertainty in agricultural profits, urbanization, structural changes in employment patterns in India.

**Table 1: Share of Agricultural Workers in India: 1951-2011**

Year	Total Population (Cr)	Rural Population (Cr)	Total Workers (Cr)	Agricultural Workers			Rural Population (%)	Agricultural Workers			Total Agricultural Workers (%)
				Cultivators (Cr)	Agricultural Labourers (Cr)	Total Agricultural Workers (Cr)		Total Workers (%)	Cultivators (%)	Agricultural Labourers (%)	
1951	36.11	29.86	13.95	6.99	2.73	9.72	82.7	38.6	71.9	28	26.9
1961	43.92	36.03	18.87	9.96	3.15	13.11	82	42.9	75.9	24	29.8
1971	54.82	43.9	18.04	7.82	4.75	12.57	8	32.9	62.2	37.7	22.9
1981	68.33	52.56	24.46	9.25	5.55	14.8	76.9	35.8	62.5	37.5	21.7
1991	84.64	63.06	31.41	11.07	7.46	18.53	74.5	37.1	59.7	40.2	21.9
2001	102.87	74.26	40.22	12.73	10.68	23.41	72.2	39.1	54.3	45.6	22.8
2011	121.08	83.37	48.19	11.88	14.43	26.31	68.9	39.8	45.1	54.8	21.7

Source: Registrar General of India

**Table 2: Indebtedness among Agricultural Households by Size of landholdings in India: 2013**

Land Holding Size	Agricultural Households (Lakh)	Indebted Agricultural Households (Lakh)	Indebted Agricultural Households (%)
Landless Farmers	23.89	10.02	41.9
Marginal Farmers	287.66	135.97	47.3
Semi-marginal Farmers	314.81	152.16	48.3
Small Farmers	154.58	86.11	55.7
Medium Farmers	84.35	56.1	66.5
Semi medium Farmers	33.02	25.21	76.3
Large Farmers	3.71	2.92	78.7
Total	902.01	468.48	51.9

Source: Situation Assessment Survey of Agricultural households (Jan-Dec2013) National Sample Survey Office (NSSO)

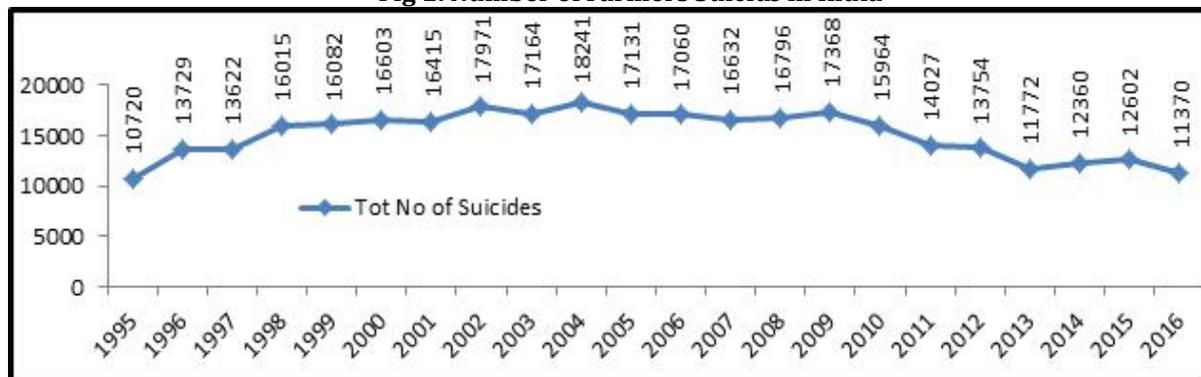
## 5.2 Indebtedness among Agricultural Households in India

The table 2 above shows the share of indebted agricultural households is high among large (78.7 percent), semi-medium (76.3 percent) and medium farmers (66.5 percent) compared to that of landless (41.9percent), marginal (47.3 percent), semi marginal (48.3percent) and small (55.7percent).

## 5.3 Trends in Farmer's suicide in India: 1995-2016

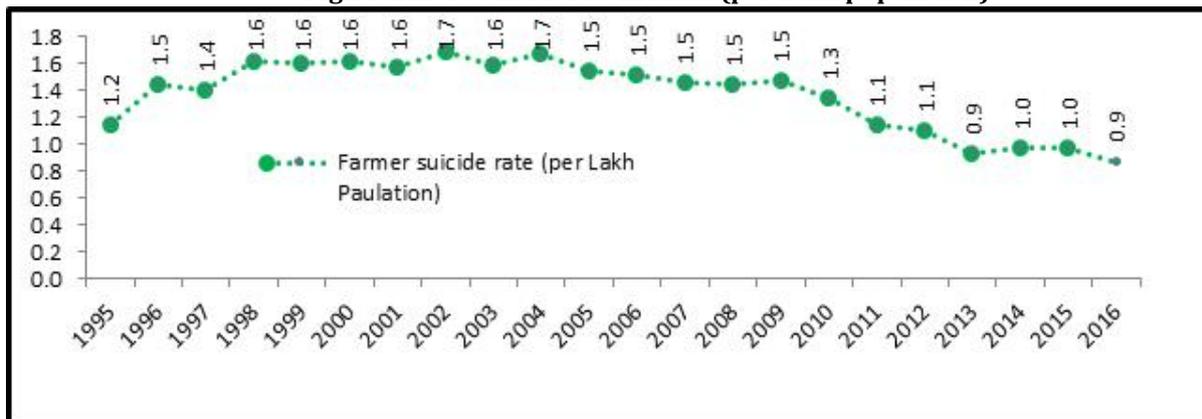
The Fig 1 depicts an increasing trend of farmers suicide up to 2004 (18241) since 1995 (10720). But thereafter it shows a decreasing trend due to introduction of special

rehabilitation package in 2006, which provided debt relief to farmers, improved the institutional credit and also enhanced irrigation facilities for 31 districts of four states( Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala) having relatively high incidence of farmers suicide. (Fig 2)The trend in Rate of suicides among the farmers is similar to that of number of farmer's suicide and it has decreased from 1.2 in 1995 to 0.9 in 2016. The Fig 2 shows a declining trend in rate of farmers' suicide in India from 1.7 people per Lakh population in 2005 to 0.9 person per Lakh population by 2016. Before 2005 India has experienced an increasing trend from 1.2 in 1995 to 1.7 in 2005.

**Fig 1: Number of Farmers Suicide in India**

Source: National Crime Records Bureau, New Delhi

**Fig 2 Farmers suicide rate in India (per Lakh population)**



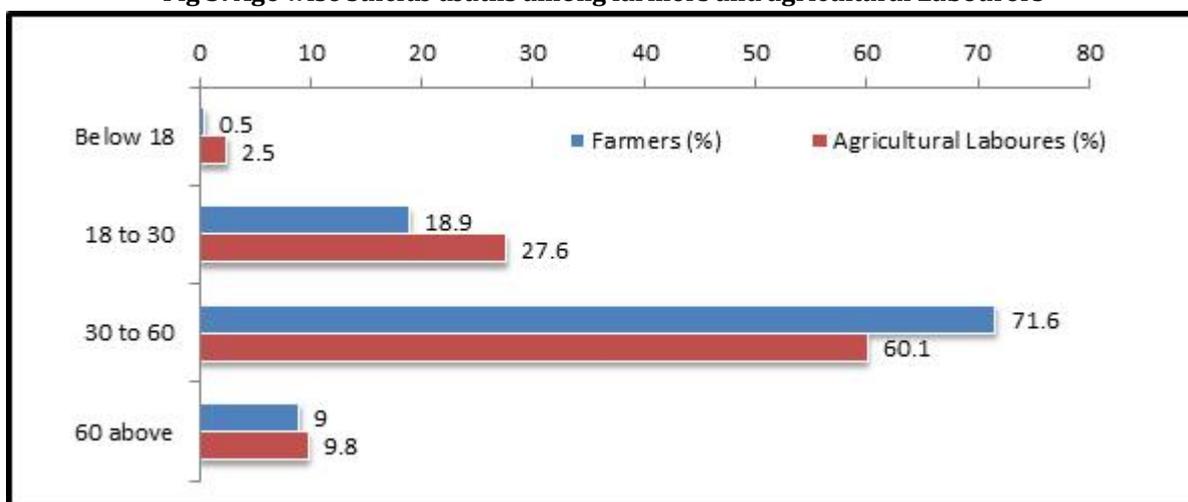
Source: Author Calculation

**5.4 Age wise farmer’s suicide in India**

According to the data in Fig 3 majority of suicide are committed by people of 30-60 age group in which farmers (71.6 percent) are comparatively more than agro-labourers

(60.1) because of multiple pressures like family, society, reputation etc. The age group 18 to 30 is also more compared to group 60 and above but less compared to 30-60 age groups.

**Fig 3: Age wise suicide deaths among farmers and agricultural Labourers**



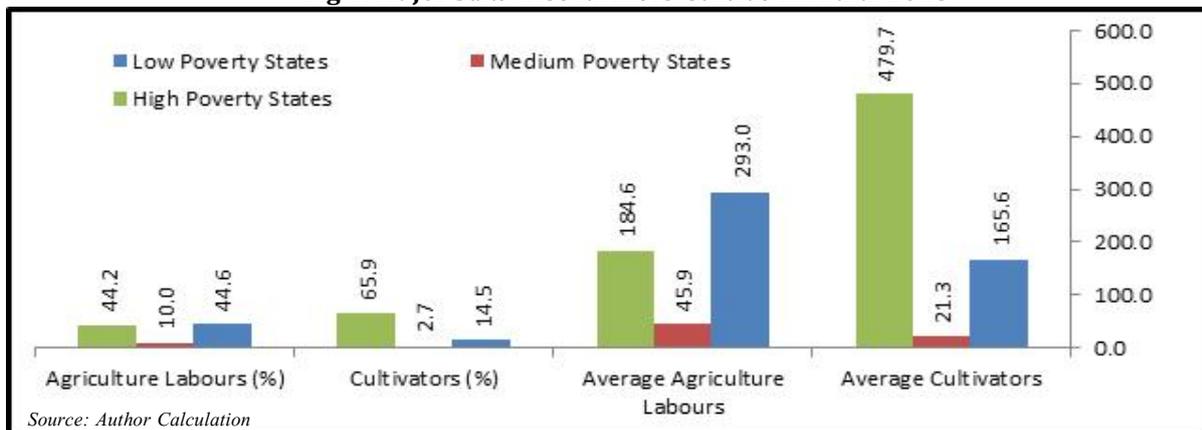
Source: National Crime Records Bureau, New Delhi

**5.5 Farmers suicide in low and high poverty states**

In fig 4 the data concludes that the high poverty states have large number of farmers committing suicide (479.7) which is double than that of India (237.5). In medium poverty states the average farmers suicide is less (21.3) than that of in high and low poverty states. Agricultural labourers suicides are

very high (293) in low poverty states compared to high (184.6) and medium (45.9) poverty states (147.6) and also to that of India (162.2). Most of the farmer’s suicides are concentrated only in Karnataka (1569), Maharashtra (4291), Kerala (210) and Chhattisgarh (954).

**Fig 4: Major State wise farmers’ suicide in India: 2015**



Source: Author Calculation

**5.5 Status of Farmers Suicide by different levels of landholdings: 2015**

The table 3 below indicates that in India small (67.5percent) and marginal (66.8percent) farmers of high poverty states are major victims to suicide compared to that of other level of landholders in other states as they have high vulnerability towards poverty. The variance is high among the marginal and small farmers in India especially in low poverty states which is 50.0percent and 53.7percent respectively.

**5.6 Farmers suicide and indebted agricultural households: 2015**

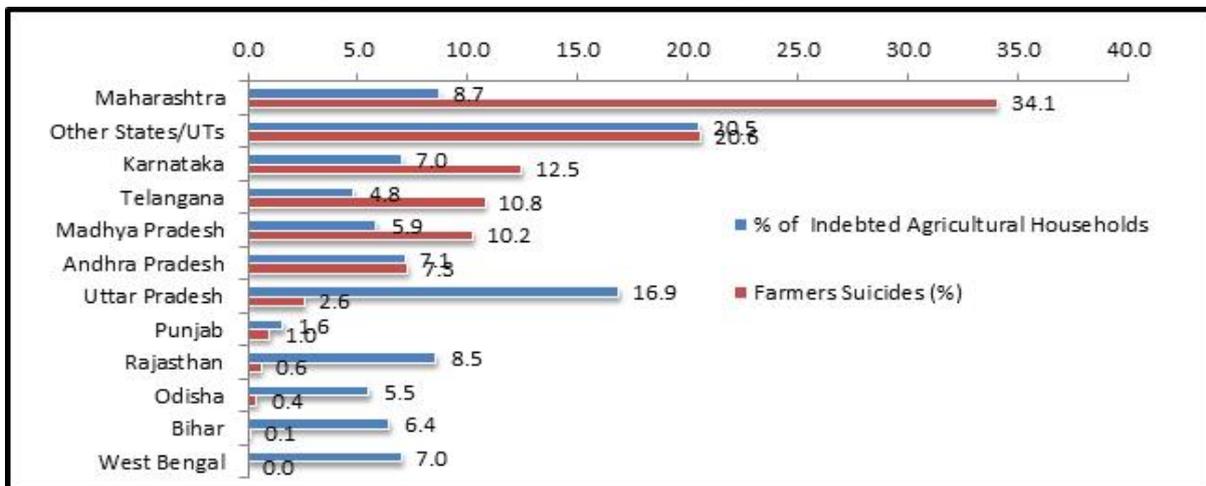
The Fig 5 shows that Uttar Pradesh (16.9 percent), Maharashtra (8.7 percent), Rajasthan (8.5 percent) and Karnataka (7.0 percent) are top 4 states to record indebtedness of agricultural households but high rate of suicides are recorded only in Maharashtra (34.1 percent) and Karnataka (12.5 percent) which is higher than the percent of indebted agricultural households in these states. The major reason found in states are shifting towards cultivation of commercial crops and due to delayed repayments from agents for their crops they get more vulnerable towards poverty and therefore more prone to commit suicide.

**Table 3: farmer’s suicide among various levels of landholdings**

States farmers Group		Marginal Farmers	Small Farmers	Medium Farmers	Large Farmers	Total
Low Poverty States	Total (%)	30.1	30.1	33.2	56.3	31.4
	average	94.4	155.7	96.6	12.9	359.6
	STD	189.0	290.0	193.9	30.1	700.9
	CV	50.0	53.7	49.8	42.7	51.3
Medium Poverty States	Total (%)	3.0	1.9	2.5	6.3	2.4
	average	6.5	7.0	5.1	1.0	19.6
	STD	15.5	17.5	10.4	3.2	45.3
	CV	42.0	40.1	49.1	31.6	43.2
High Poverty States	Total (%)	66.8	67.5	64.2	37.5	65.9
	average	133.4	222	118.7	5.5	479.5
	STD	259.2	421.2	270.5	11.2	939.7
	CV	51.4	52.7	43.9	48.7	51.0
All India	Total	2195.0	3618.0	2034.0	160.0	8007.0
	average	75.6	124.2	70.1	5.5	275.4
	STD	175.2	289.7	181.8	15.9	644.6
	CV	43.2	42.9	38.6	34.7	42.7

Source: Author Calculation

**Fig 5: Farmers suicide and indebted agricultural households**



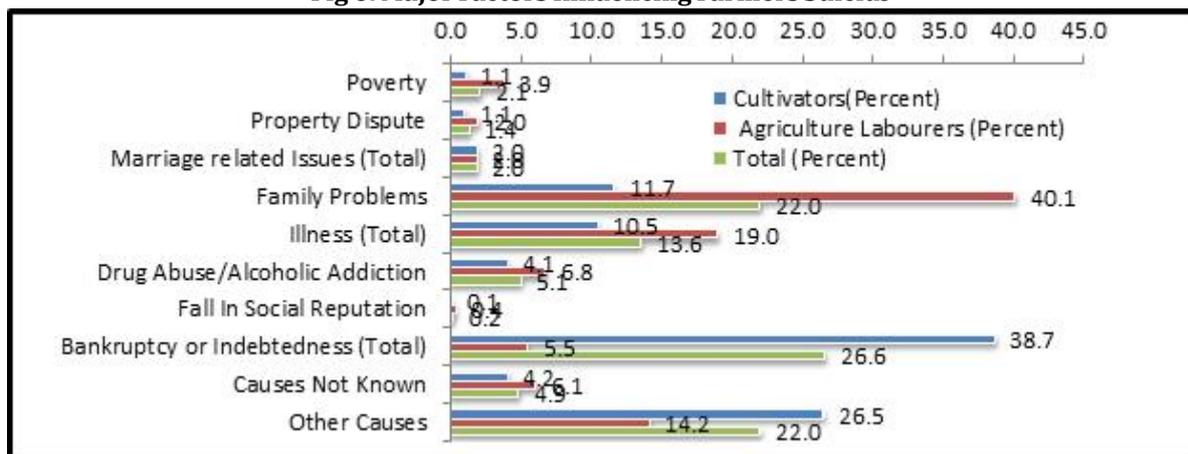
Source: National Crime Records Bureau, New Delhi

**5.7 Major Factors Influencing Farmers Suicide**

Among the cultivators, bankruptcy or indebtedness are the major factors leading to farmers’ purposive killing themselves, whereas for agricultural farmers, family problems and illness are the major factors. Thus the fig 6 concludes that in India debt and family problems are considered as major

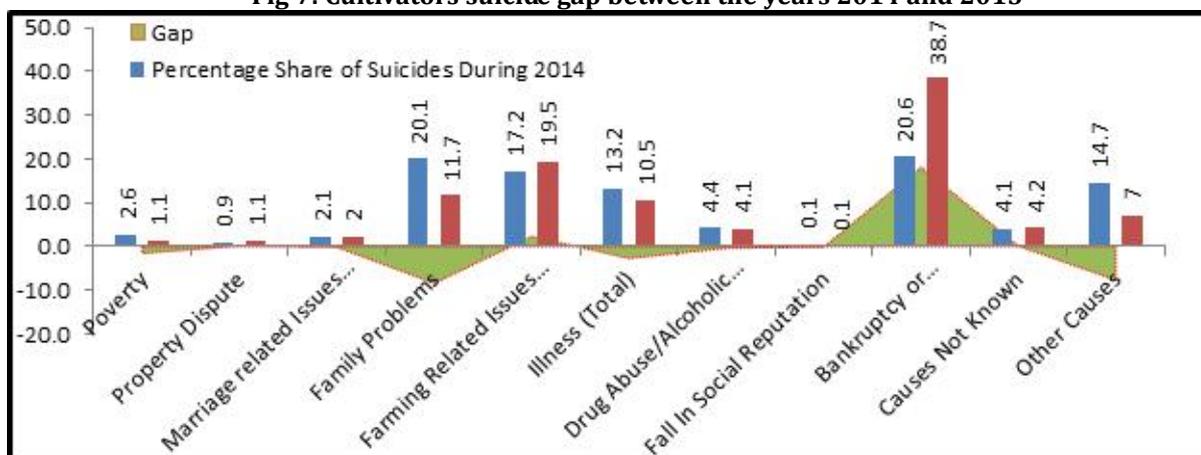
factors for farmers’ suicide. Fig 7 shows the difference in reasons for suicides between the years 2014 and 2015 wherein the bankruptcy or indebtedness has increased by 18.1 percent and for the same period 8.4 percent suicides among cultivators have decreased because of family problems.

**Fig 6: Major Factors Influencing Farmers Suicide**



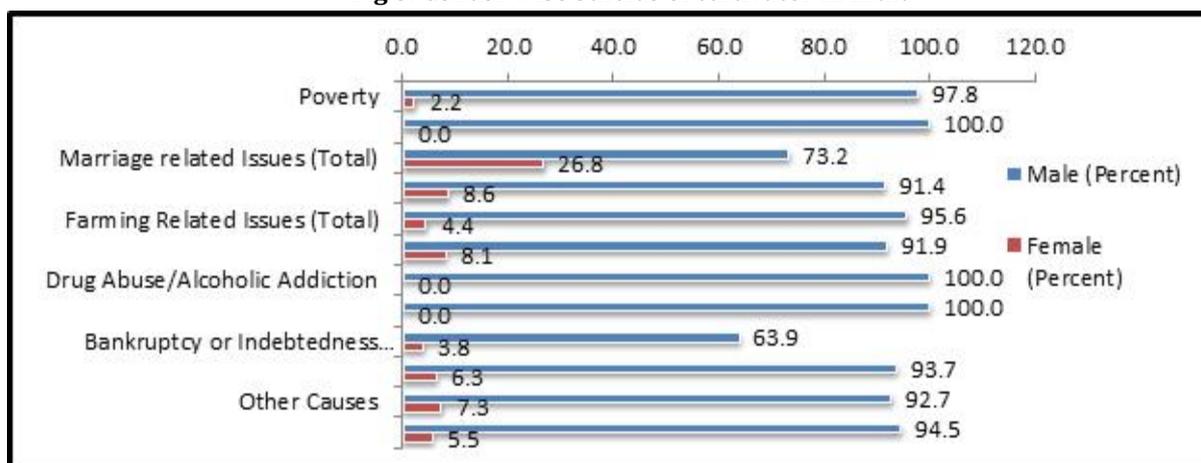
Source: National Crime Records Bureau, New Delhi

**Fig 7: Cultivators suicide gap between the years 2014 and 2015**



Source: National Crime Records Bureau, New Delhi

**Fig 8: Gender wise Suicide of cultivator in India**



Source: National Crime Records Bureau, New Delhi

**5.8 Gender wise Suicide of cultivator in India**

The fig 8 depicts, compared to that of female male are more prone to commit suicide. The National Mental Health Association of the USA states that “No matter the race or age of the person; how rich or poor they are, it is true that most people who commit suicide have a mental or emotional disorder”. And Men are considered emotionally weak than women and the major actors disturbing their emotions are social reputation, alcoholic addiction, property disputes and

poverty. On the other hand causes for female cultivator committing suicide are marriage related issues and family problems.

**6. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The foregoing analysis indicate that the incidence of farmers’ suicide in India though shows a decreasing trend from 2005 to 2015 it is still high compare to 1995. Out of 39.8 percent of total working population in India 21.7 percent

of population are engaged in agricultural activities and are in distress and committing suicide which triggers a major loss to India's Human Capital resource. The study also shows that high rates of suicide are recorded in Maharashtra (34.1 percent) and Karnataka (12.5 percent) and therefore farmers' suicide is high among the high poverty states of India.

According to the analysis in India small (67.5percent) and marginal (66.8percent) farmers of high poverty states are major victims to suicide compared to that of other level of landholders in other states as they have high vulnerability towards poverty. Among the cultivators, bankruptcy or indebtedness are the major factors leading to farmers' purposive killing themselves. And mainly men are more prone to commit suicide compared to that of women.

Concerned to the prior major findings in the study the following major suggestions are made to be inculcated in the policies of the government. Farmers counseling centers should be established in the rural area by the help of local governments which will help in providing a moral strength to the farmers. The policies encouraging other agricultural allied activities should be implemented in states especially in states with high poverty incidence. As the study reveals indebtedness as a major cause for suicide in India it suggests strict regulating of private or informal lending practices and credits from formal sector should be enhanced, institutional finance should be made easily accessible to the poorest farmers and also awareness about insurance schemes and their facilities must be made among the farmers. The technological advancement in agriculture should be passed down to small farmers and cooperative farming must be promoted and regulated thoroughly among them for best results. Government should take up the responsibility of providing training to the farmers to acquire new skills for providing alternative source of income especially in Maharashtra and Karnataka which are coming under the high poverty states region.

Farmer is the only earning member in his family; his death leaves his family in destitution. If the issue remains unaddressed it is a large possibility that India would soon emerge as a food deficient country and If the Government fail

to give appropriate attention to this growing issue, the situation may get even poorer and the nation will have to pay very severe socio-economic costs. There cannot be one single solution to reduce or end the woes of farmers. Giving monetary relief is not an effective solution. The solution should aim at the entire structure of agriculture. "Give a man a fish, he will eat for a day but teach him how to fish, he will eat for the rest of his life", so goes the popular saying, the case of our Indian farmers is similar to this, what they need is a means to sustain throughout their lives without having the face the desperation that adversity drives them to. If India has to shine, it is these farmers that need to be empowered.

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