

## Claim of Doubling Farmers' Income. But Why Is the India's Farmer Suicide Rate Increasing?

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*To understand farmer suicides, it is essential to analyze their underlying causes, especially in the context of Maharashtra. In 1990, P. Sainath, the rural editor of The Hindu, began reporting on recurring farmer suicides, with initial cases emerging from Maharashtra and later from Andhra Pradesh.*

Initially, it was believed that these suicides were largely confined to cotton farmers in the Vidarbha region. However, data released in 2010 by the Maharashtra State Crime Records Bureau revealed that suicides were widespread among farmers cultivating various cash crops across the state. Importantly, this crisis was not limited to small farmers; medium and large farmers were also affected. In response, the state government established multiple inquiry committees, and then Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh announced a relief package of ₹110 billion for farmers in Vidarbha. Despite these measures, the agrarian crisis deepened, with farmer suicides reported across several states including Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, 17,368 farmer suicides were recorded in 2009, with 62 percent occurring in just five states—Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh.

In Maharashtra alone, between January 1 and December 31, 2024, a total of 2,706 farmers from Vidarbha and Marathwada died by suicide, as acknowledged by State Relief and Rehabilitation Minister Makarand Patil. Of these, 1,069 cases were from the Amravati division and 952 from the Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar division, driven by factors such as climate change, unseasonal rainfall, drought, crop failure, and indebtedness. Out of these cases, 1,563 were deemed eligible for government compensation, with affected families receiving financial assistance of ₹1 lakh in structured support. Over the past decade, Maharashtra has recorded an average of around 3,000 farmer suicides annually. In 2020 alone, 2,270 farmers ended their lives, according to data obtained through the Right to Information Act. While official claims suggest a decline in some regions, Vidarbha continues to remain a hotspot for such tragedies.

The fundamental issue lies in the structural vulnerability of agriculture in the region. A significant portion of Vidarbha's population depends entirely on farming, with nearly 91 percent of agricultural land reliant on monsoon rainfall. This dependence makes farmers highly susceptible to climatic uncertainties. However, the crisis is not solely environmental; it is also rooted in policy failures, rising input costs, and systemic neglect. Farmers often lack access to reliable institutional credit and are forced to depend on private moneylenders, trapping them in cycles of debt. Additionally, the shift towards high-cost cash

crops like cotton has increased financial risks, particularly in the face of erratic weather patterns.

Take the example of cotton cultivation in Vidarbha, especially in districts like Yavatmal. Farmers invest approximately ₹36,000 per acre, covering expenses such as land preparation, seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation, labor, and transportation. Despite such significant investments, unpredictable weather often leads to severe crop losses—sometimes up to 60 percent—resulting in financial collapse. Even when crops are harvested, farmers frequently struggle to secure fair prices due to delays in government procurement processes. As a result, many are forced to sell their produce at lower rates to private traders, further compounding their losses.

Data from recent years shows that Amravati division has recorded the highest number of farmer suicides, followed by the Aurangabad division. Regions like Nashik and Nagpur have also seen rising trends. This indicates that the crisis is widespread and not confined to a single geographic area. At a broader level, Indian agriculture continues to be heavily dependent on the monsoon. Crop failures, rising input costs, declining profitability, and mounting debt create a vicious cycle from which farmers struggle to escape. The shrinking size of landholdings adds another layer of vulnerability. Average landholding has significantly declined over the decades, making agriculture less viable as a primary livelihood.

According to NABARD's All India Rural Financial Inclusion Survey (NAFIS) 2021-22, while farmers' average monthly income increased from ₹8,059 in 2016-17 to ₹12,698 in 2021-22, their monthly expenditure rose even faster—from ₹6,646 to ₹11,262. This indicates that rising income is being offset by increasing costs. Simultaneously, the percentage of indebted households has increased, with more farmers relying on institutional credit and schemes like the Kisan Credit Card. Although financial inclusion has improved, it has not translated into economic stability.

The situation is further aggravated by broader environmental and economic challenges. According to the Centre for Science and Environment, 10,881 individuals associated with agriculture died by suicide in 2021, averaging around 30 deaths per day. Maharashtra recorded the highest number of such cases. Climate change, pest attacks, declining crop prices, and rising input costs have made agriculture increasingly unviable. Despite policy announcements and claims of doubling farmers' income, many farmers do not receive Minimum Support Prices for their produce. Consequently, they fall deeper into debt and despair, often facing humiliation from creditors and middlemen, which pushes them toward extreme steps.

Today, farming has become a loss-making occupation for many. This has led not only to an increase in suicides but also to a growing trend of rural youth abandoning agriculture in search of better opportunities. The promise of doubling farmers' income remains largely unfulfilled, raising serious questions about policy implementation and effectiveness. There is an urgent need for structural reforms that ensure fair pricing, reduce input costs, and strengthen institutional support systems.

In addition to economic distress, India is also facing an escalating water crisis. Reservoir levels have declined significantly, with storage levels dropping by around 30 percent, indicating drought-like conditions in several regions. States such as Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu are experiencing severe water shortages, affecting both

agriculture and daily life. These challenges highlight the urgent need for improved water management, investment in irrigation infrastructure, and promotion of water conservation practices.

Agriculture, the backbone of India's economy, is currently grappling with multiple interconnected challenges. While efforts such as financial inclusion, insurance coverage, and pension schemes have shown some progress, they are insufficient to address the deeper structural issues. Shrinking landholdings, rising costs, climate uncertainty, and policy gaps continue to threaten the sustainability of farming.

Ultimately, when a farmer sees all doors closed, suicide becomes a tragic last resort. Preventing this requires a collective effort from the government, society, and civil institutions. Strengthening farmers' resilience through sustainable agricultural practices, crop diversification, climate adaptation strategies, and fair market access is critical. Without urgent and decisive action, not only will farmers continue to suffer, but the country's food security will also be at serious risk.

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