

2. **ABOUT 10 A DAY – THE DEATH
TOLL IN INDIAN AGRICULTURE**

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At least 3,146 farmers committed suicide in Maharashtra in 2013, the latest data of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) show. That brings the total number of farmers taking their own lives in the Western Indian state to 60,750 since 1995. Maharashtra's record finds no mention in the media. The picture in the state got a lot worse after 2004. On average, 3,685 farmers in the state took their lives every year between 2004 and 2013.

This means Maharashtra is witnessing, on average, over ten farmers' suicides every single day these past ten years in a row. That's a lot worse than its already awful average of seven such deaths a day between 1995 and 2003. A rise of 42 per cent in fact. (The NCRB began recording farm data in its annual Accidental Deaths & Suicides in India reports in 1995.)

A total of 296,438 farmers have committed suicide in India since 1995.

Meanwhile, Maharashtra's 3,146 figures reflect a decline of 640 farm suicides as compared

to the 2012. In fact all the Big 5 states in farm suicides have recorded declines in 2013 relative to the previous year. Andhra Pradesh claims a fall of 558, Chhattisgarh 4, Madhya Pradesh 82 and Karnataka 472.

So are fewer Indian farmers killing themselves today? The latest ADSI report of the NCRB would appear to suggest so. The nation-wide figure has fallen to 11,744 farm suicides, down 1,982 from 13,754 in 2012. (<http://ncrb.gov.in/adsi2013/table-2.11.pdf>).

A very welcome decline - until you look at the numbers more closely. With a total of 7,653, the Big 5 still account for a full two-thirds of all farmers' suicides in the country. No changes in the pattern there. And 15 other states recorded mostly mild increases. Of those, only Haryana records a significant increase of 98.

This great 'fall' also perpetuates a growing trend of states with otherwise high farm suicide numbers declaring 'zero' or near zero suicides year after year. Chhattisgarh has done this three years in a row now since

2011: it has announced 0, 4 and 0 farmer suicides. West Bengal also records zero in both 2012 and 2013. What if we take a three-year average for these states before they started their zero-sum games? For Chhattisgarh that average was 1,567. For West Bengal 951. That's a total of 2,518. Add that to the 2013 total and it goes up 14,262. That's even higher than the 2012 figure (when too, the same fudging was on).

Even accepting the 11,744 figure for 2013, that brings the national total since 1995 to 296,438 farmers' suicides (NCRB ADSI reports 1995-2013).

This is not to say that states cannot or have not seen any decline at all. (Also, one-off annual rises or falls are quite normal). Just that the nature of that decline as recorded in the past three years is highly suspect. So Chhattisgarh, a state that saw over 14,000 farmer suicides from 2001 to 2010, suddenly has none at all in the next three years. A model worth emulating? Other states surely think so. They're getting in on the fraud, too.

Puducherry, for long the worst among union territories in farm suicides, has declared a zero figure in 2011, 2012 and 2013. In 2010, it claimed a modest four. But in 2009, its figure was 154 farm suicides.

"Clearly, the massaging of the data continues", says Prof K Nagaraj, an economist at the Asian College of Journalism, Chennai. Prof Nagaraj's 2008 study on farm suicides in India remains the most important one on the subject. "When you want to play down very bad numbers in one column, you can't just erase them. You have to fit them into some other, catch-all category. Shoving unwanted numbers into "Others" is the common route to data massaging."

And that's exactly the trend in the data the states have been submitting to the NCRB. This year, too.

Here's another thing that gives away the heavy massaging the data have been subject to at the state level.

On the same page as the NCRB table which records the "Self-employed (farming / agriculture)" is another column: "Self-employed (Others)." (<http://ncrb.gov.in/adsi2013/table-2.11.pdf>)

As Chhattisgarh's farmer suicides numbers have dwindled to zero, its numbers of suicides in this "Self-employed (Others)" column have swollen. In the years when Chhattisgarh wasn't blanking out farm suicides numbers (e.g. 2008 and 2009), its figures in this "Others" column were, 826 and



851. In the last two years, when it reports zero farm suicides, these numbers soar to 1826 and 2077. Maharashtra, which claims a decline of 640 in farm suicides, records a rise of over 1,000 suicides under "Self-employed (Others)." Madhya Pradesh records a decline of 82 in farmer suicide numbers, but a rise of 236 in this "Others" category.

Puducherry shows a similar trend. West Bengal solved that problem by simply not filing any data at all in 2012. So clearly, even if you can't shove the numbers under the carpet, you can dump some of them in "Others."

Those prematurely celebrating a decline miss another point. There were 7.7 million fewer farmers in 2011 than there were in 2011, as the Census data show us. Millions were and are either quitting the profession or losing full farmer status. In that period, the country, on average, saw 2,000 fewer farmers each day. So there were surely even fewer farmers in 2013. What do we get if we view the suicide numbers against this shrinking farmer base?

As Prof. Nagaraj and researchers at the M S Swaminathan Research

Foundation (MSSRF) calculated last year from NCRB and Census data across a decade: "The adjusted farmers' suicide rate for 2011 is in fact slightly higher than it was in 2001." (<http://psainath.org/farmers-suicide-rates-soar-above-the-rest/>) And that's after heavy data fudging at the State level. As their calculations showed, suicide rates among Indian farmers were a chilling 47 per cent higher than they were for the rest of the population in 2011. In some of the States worst hit by the agrarian crisis, they were well over 100 per cent higher. In Maharashtra, farmers were killing themselves at a rate that was 162 per cent higher than that for any other Indians excluding farmers. A farmer in this State is two-and-a-half times more likely to commit suicide than anyone else in the country, other than farmers.

Are the suicides occurring because of drought and crop failure?

Farmers have been killing themselves in years when the crop has been excellent. And in seasons when it has failed. They have taken their own lives in large numbers in very different years. When it rains they lose

out, when it doesn't, they lose out worse. There have been awful suicide numbers in some good monsoon years. And so too, in years of drought, which can make things more terrible.

The suicides occurred overwhelmingly amongst cash crop farmers. Growers of cotton, sugar cane, groundnut, vanilla, coffee, pepper and others. Far fewer suicides occur amongst growers of paddy or wheat. Can we argue that drought kills cash crop farmers but not those cultivating food crops?

The monsoon does have a very real impact on agriculture. But it is by no means the main reason for the farm suicides. And with the bulk of those suicides occurring amongst cash crop farmers, the issues of debt, hyper-commercialization, exploding input costs, water-use patterns, and severe price shocks and price volatility, come much more to the fore. All factors majorly driven by state policies.

Against the background of these factors, you can be sure that if a drought really unfolds this year, they're in very big trouble. And we will know very shortly. July is the main month of the monsoon. It normally accounts for over 50 per cent of the rains, thus equaling the importance of the other three months of June, August

and September combined. Given the situation that seems to be building, I'd go slow on the celebrations.

Farmers' suicides in the state of Maharashtra 1995-2013

YEAR	MAHARASHTRA FARM SUICIDES
1995	1083
1996	1981
1997	1917
1998	2409
1999	2423
2000	3022
2001	3536
2002	3695
2003	3836
Total 1995-2003	23,902
2004	4147
2005	3926
2006	4453
2007	4238
2008	3802
2009	2872
2010	3141
2011	3337
2012	3786
2013	3146
Total 2004-2013	36,848
Total 1995-2013	60,750

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:**

According to reports in the media, there have been 93 farmer suicides in 45 days in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra state, India, since January 01, 2015. Last year, the region reported 569 farmer suicides, a sharp rise from the 207 reported in 2013.

Sainath told us that these numbers the media reports simply regurgitate those provided by the Divisional Commissioner, Collector, Agricultural Secretary and others in the bureaucracy. "They are NOT the National Crime Record Bureau numbers on which the statistics of the piece are based. Even the NCRB figures are being massively massaged. But they are always 5-6 times, or more, higher than the media-bureaucracy figures," he said.

Farmers continue to commit suicide in India every single day. Rarely do these reports make it to the pages of mainstream media. Families that are left behind often do not get state provided compensation, owing to the red tape and bureaucratic hassles involved. These figures do not involve women farmers because they are not classified in the Census figures as farmers, even when they are the primary workers on the land. Several more suicides remain unreported. Owing to this and many other factors, it is estimated that the actual number of farmer suicides in the country is much higher than the available figures.

P Sainath is one of India's most respected and renowned journalists reporting on rural affairs. His writes and speaks extensively on farmer suicides, the corporatization of agriculture and India's agrarian crisis. His latest project People's Archive of Rural India (PARI) is an attempt to archive the lives and stories of 833 million people of rural India through little told stories, photos and videos. P Sainath's works have been compiled at psainath.org, ruralindiaonline.org and elsewhere.

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