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**Beyond “Crises”: Rethinking  
Contemporary Punjab Agriculture**

**Surinder S. Jodhka**



**Governance And Policy Spaces (GAPS) Project  
Centre for Economic and Social Studies  
Nizamiah Observatory Campus, Begumpet  
Hyderabad - 500 016, Andhra Pradesh, India.**

About the Authors :

Surinder S.Jodhka is an Associated Professor at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi-110 067.

Jodhka can be contacted at [ssjodhka@yahoo.com](mailto:ssjodhka@yahoo.com); [jodhka@mail.jnu.ac.in](mailto:jodhka@mail.jnu.ac.in)

## Abstract

The sudden spurt in cases of suicides by small and marginal farmers in different parts of India over the last couple of years has created a sense of unprecedented crisis in Indian agriculture. The fact that this has happened simultaneously in different regions of India – from Kerala and Karnataka to Maharashtra and Punjab – has understandably made social scientists, activists, and policy makers wonder about the connection it could have with the new perspective on economic development that the Indian state adopted during the early 1990s, viz. liberalization and related reforms, and opening-up of Indian economy to the processes of globalization.

Taking cues from my ongoing fieldwork in rural Punjab and the available literature on Farmer's suicides in the state, I shall try to argue in my paper that though liberalization/globalization played a crucial role in making agriculture marginal to the Indian economy in the 1990s and after, the contemporary "crisis" of Punjab agriculture has a much broader context and cannot be explained only by referring to its "neglect" during the post-globalization/liberalization period. The contemporary crisis of agriculture also ought to be seen in the wider context of several other changes that the social structure of rural Punjab, as also the farming communities in the region have been experiencing during the last four or five decades.

Though a large proportion of population in Punjab continues to live in rural areas, the so-called traditional structure of the village has seen many fundamental changes over the last three or four decades. Similarly, the farming caste/class has also undergone many internal changes during this period. The internal differentiation that this caste/class has experienced during the Green/post-Green Revolution period has weakened its position in the regional and national politics. It is perhaps this growing fragmentation of the agrarian communities that has considerably weakened the farmers' movement in the region, and perhaps also in the country at large.

Seeing the phenomenon of agrarian crisis and change in this broader historical perspective may help us go beyond the populist notion of "the rural" that contemporary discourses on the subject of agrarian crisis seem to be working with.

## Beyond “Crises”: Rethinking Contemporary Punjab Agriculture

Surinder S. Jodhka

While presenting the annual budget to the State Assembly of Punjab on 19 March 2001, Captain Kanwaljit Singh, the then finance minister in the state government, underlined the need for addressing the question of Punjab farmers committing suicide. “Such incidents of suicide”, he argued, “need to be identified and the families becoming destitute need support for their social and economic rehabilitation”. Making it a part of state’s budgetary provisions, he also announced that if the earning member of a family committed suicide, “the state would identify the case and pay a compensation of Rs. 2.50 lakhs for the rehabilitation of the family”<sup>1</sup>. Though by early 2001, a lot had already been written and talked about the impending agrarian distress/crisis, and a large number of suicides by marginal and small farmers had been reported from different parts of India, it was perhaps for the first time that a state government officially acknowledged the existence of such a phenomenon, and made some provision for helping the aggrieved families<sup>2</sup>.

Given that the Green Revolution was first introduced in Punjab, it also matured here before it did in other places in the country. The new technology raised productivity of land by several times. It also changed the rural social structure and had a direct bearing on the nature of local and regional politics. Punjab emerged as a leading state of the country with highest per capita income.

However, the excitement did not last for very long. After two decades of growth, the Green Revolution began to lose its charm, and was followed by a series of crises. Beginning

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<sup>1</sup> *The Tribune*, Chandigarh March 21 2001.

<sup>2</sup> This move was predictably criticized by various people for different reasons; one of them being that such a provision could in fact encourage those in distress to take their life, amounted to abetment of suicide. Some described the move as being communal, suggesting that the Akali government wanted to appease the farmers because most of them were Sikhs and the party’s “vote bank”. See, for example, ‘Will more farmers commit suicide now?’ by Chander Prakash *The Tribune*, Chandigarh March 21 2001

with early 1980s, “crisis” became the dominant mode of representing Punjab. From politics and economics to culture and ecology, everything seemed to be in a state of crisis in Punjab. The rise of Sikh militancy during the 1980s, for example, was often explained by referring to the successes and failures of the Green Revolution (see Jodhka 1997; 2001a).

While it might at times serve some useful political or even academic purpose to talk about the existing state of affairs in terms of crisis, such a language could also foil any recognition of the processes of social and economic change being experienced on ground, desirable or undesirable. It is precisely this that I wish to attempt in my paper, viz. looking at the socio-economic changes that have come about in the rural Punjab and how we could best conceptualize the existing state of affairs in Punjab agriculture.

## I

Located on the northwest border of India, Punjab is a rather small state occupying less than 2 percent of the total geographical area inhabiting a little more than 2 percent of the total population of the country. Bengal and Punjab were the only two provinces that were partitioned when the formation of independent nation-states of India and Pakistan was announced by the colonial rulers in 1947. Punjab thus became a border-state, located on the “periphery” on India. The state was peripheral to India not only geographically but also socially and culturally. Ever since its re-organization in 1966 Punjab has been one of the few regions of the country where Hindus, who constitute more than 80 per cent of India’s population, have been a minority.

Notwithstanding its peripheral location, Punjab has always been an important region in the political and cultural imagination of the nation. As mentioned above, until recently Punjab was viewed as the most dynamic and progressive state of the country, particularly for its successes in the agrarian sector. The Green Revolution was successful in other parts of India as well, but it was Punjab that it primarily came to be identified with.

The available statistics on various indicators of agricultural growth speak for themselves. Of all the states of India, Punjab’s growth rate was the highest during 1960s to the middle of 1980s in agriculture. Annual rate of increase in production of food grains during the period 1961-62 to 1985-86 for the state was more than double of the figure for the country as a whole. The percentage of high yielding varieties (HYV) of seed in the total area under food grains in Punjab was as high as 73 percent in 1974-75 (all India 31 percent) and 95

percent in 1983-85 (all India 54 percent). While Punjab had 17,459 tractors per hundred thousand holdings, the all India figure was only 714. The same holds true for most other such indicators (Kohli and Singh 1997). These achievements have also been very widely recognized. The opening lines of the recent World Bank report on the state, for example, summarizes Punjab's achievements quite well:

Punjab is India's most prosperous and developed state with the lowest poverty rate. At the end of the 1990s, more than 94 percent of Punjab's citizens were above the poverty line, 70 percent were literate, 94 percent of the six year olds were enrolled in primary schools, 72 percent of children under twelve months were immunized, 99 percent of households had access to safe drinking water, and the average life expectancy of its citizen was 68 years. The remarkable development record of Punjab can also be inferred from the fact that it has already achieved, or is well on track to achieve, most of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). According to India's National Human Development Report (2001), Punjab was ranked second only to Kerala in terms of the overall level of human development among the major Indian states. Most citizens of Punjab have thus already achieved a level of socio-economic status that the majority of Indian citizens are unlikely to experience in their lifetime (World Bank 2004: 3).

Apart from the prosperity that the success of Green Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s brought to the people of Punjab, it also played a very important role in solving the gargantuan problem of food scarcity of the country. The state rightly came to be known as the food basket of India. The official website of the state government proudly claims that 'Punjab produces 22 percent of the country's wheat (12.7 million tons), 9 percent of rice (6.8 million tons) and 24 percent of cotton (0.3 million tons). It contributes 60 to 70 percent of wheat and 40 to 50 percent of rice to the central pool'<sup>3</sup>.

The discourse of Green Revolution also changed the politico-cultural dynamics of the state. It was not only to the new agrarian technologies and the high yielding varieties of seeds that the success of Green Revolution was attributed. Credit was also given to the enterprising rugged farmers of the region and their hard work. Their love for land and the high values they attached to the practice of self-cultivation (*khudkasht*) played important roles in making the Green Revolution a success story in the region, much before it took roots in other parts of India.

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<sup>3</sup> As in the official website of the Punjab Government 2004 <[punjabgovt.nic.in](http://punjabgovt.nic.in)>.

The local dominant agrarian castes, the Jats, have particularly been known for the pride they take in their rural identities. A sociologist working in a village of the *Doaba* region during the early 1980s had reported ‘the Jat might be employed as a school teacher, or serve in military but he saw his primary role as that of an agriculturalist; his connection with land was what he held most dear and what identified him’ (Kaur 1986:233). Another anthropologist similarly writes about the contempt that the Jats had for city life. They despised ‘the townsman as lacking in physical bravery’ and were viewed by the Jats as ‘gasping, greedy and lacking in dignity’ (Pettigrew 1992:169).

As it happened in other parts of the country, the success of Green Revolution technology and the introduction of universal adult franchise brought the locally dominant castes to centre stage of the regional/state politics. This process was perhaps more intense in states like Punjab and Haryana where the agrarian life style came to be the norm. The triumph of agrarianism not only gave the agrarian elite political power at the local and state level but also had important implications for the existing social identities. For example, though the land owning Jats had always been an important element of the Sikh community, it was after the Green Revolution that the Sikh image came to be identified with the Jats (Gupta 1996; Pettigrew 1995). And, perhaps more importantly, despite its urbanization and industrialization being above the national average, Punjab came to be popularly known as a land of prosperous agriculturists.

## II

### **The “eighties” and after**

The decade of 1980s was a critical period in contemporary Indian history. Punjab witnessed a powerful ethnic movement during the 1980s. The movement for Khalistan, a separate Sikh nation, generated a sense of “crisis”, which was felt much beyond Punjab (see Saberwal 1987). Though Sikh militancy declined during the early 1990s, it had far reaching consequences for the society and economy of Punjab.

Further, effects of the so-called “Punjab crisis” were not confined to the region alone. The “new social movements” that came-up around the same time in different parts of the sub-continent, though very different in their contents, also had several things in common with the crisis in Punjab. The “new” mobilizations by women, farmers, dalits, tribals and ethnicities all questioned the wisdom of state-directed development, the ‘nehruvian agenda’ of social transformation and modernization. Coupled with other changes at the global and

national level, the decade of the eighties saw an overall erosion of the developmental state. As Das puts it:

The goals of rational organization of life, the scientific management of society, modernization and development, to which great energies had been devoted in the sixties and early seventies, now seem like signposts to cities that are abandoned and empty (Das 1990:1).

While the 1980s was, in a sense, a creative period for Indian society when many fundamental assumptions around which the post-colonial Indian nation was being built were questioned (see Jodhka 2001b), for Punjab and for the Sikhs it was a traumatic phase. Fifteen long years of militancy and the manner in which the Indian State handled the “Punjab crisis” not only caused bloodshed and sufferings, it also quite fundamentally altered the popular image of the region. From a region known for its economic vibrancy and progress, Punjab began to be seen as a “crisis ridden state”, a region with serious problems of law and order and political unrest and therefore not suitable for safe investments.

Interestingly despite all problems, even during the 1980s the agrarian economy of Punjab continued to progress. The income of the primary sector of the state economy grew at an average of 5 percent per annum while the corresponding figure for India as a whole was around 3 percent<sup>4</sup>. The real implications of the crisis were to be felt in the following decade, during the 1990s, when the economic priorities at the national level witnessed a major shift.

### III

#### **Globalization and Indian Agriculture**

As discussed above, the decades 1980s and 1990s were important turning points in the history of contemporary India. It was perhaps for the first time in the post-independence period that there was a general feeling of unease and doubt about the paradigm of development planning that the Indian state had embarked upon after its independence from colonial rule. There had been criticisms of the policies and programmes that the first democratic government of independent India had initiated under the leadership of Pandit

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<sup>4</sup> Income of the secondary sector of the Punjab economy during the 1980s grew at the rate of 7 percent per annum as against the all India average of 6.1 percent (Gill and Ghuman 2000:450).

Jawaharlal Nehru earlier also, but they emanated mostly from conflicting ideological positions of different leaders or political formations. The strikingly new feature of the 1980s was that unlike before, the challenge this time came from “below”, from those who were supposed to benefit from development, or whom the independent Indian State had promised a better life.

In the following decade, the 1990s, the Indian state embarked upon a new framework of economic development. Pressed hard by the compulsion of changing global economy and rising import bills following the “first” Gulf War, the Government of India initiated a process of economic reforms. Though initially intended to deal with the immediate challenge of ‘balance of payment’, the reforms turned-out to be the beginning of a new phase in the economic history of India. The collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War around the same time revived the confidence of advocates of free market economy. Breakthroughs in telecommunication technology and the increasing reach of capital to virtually every nook and corner of the world ushered in a totally different phase in globalization.

These changes also initiated certain new trends in social sciences. The “old” modernist theoretical perspectives gave way to a variety of “post-modernist” ways of imagining the world. Not that everyone in social sciences quickly converted to these “new ways of looking at things”, yet their presence was felt everywhere. The language of development discourses and politics of social change witnessed many shifts. From class analyses, the focus moved to questions of culture, from revolution to empowerment, from politics to governance, from production to consumption.

Though it may indeed appear paradoxical, but historically speaking, the rise of “new social movements” in India and the trends that appeared in the following decade, liberalization/globalization, followed by the ascendance of a variety of post-modernist perspectives in the social science academy, all seemed to converge at some level with the idea of development that the new economic policies advocated. The connection between the rise of new paradigms in social sciences and the emergence of “new” social movements was not entirely accidental. They did seem to support each other. They also seemed to agree on their criticisms of the modern State, and invariably projected it as a villain. They all seemed to also emphasize on a greater role for civil society institutions, which in effect meant opening-up spaces in the sphere of development for non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This kind of ideological shift of course suited the post-liberalization/globalization State well.

These shifts have had diverse implications for different categories of Indian population. For sections of the urban middle classes and the rich, the new economic policies have proved very rewarding. The NGO movement has also acquired a certain degree of respectability and strength. Questions of human rights, caste, gender, and ecology/environment have come to occupy the centre-stage of social agenda in India and the world over, and can no longer be ignored by the State. However, these shifts have also marginalized certain “old questions”, questions that continue to be of critical significance, and have consequences for large masses of the Indian people.

The most obvious issue in this category is the marginalization of the rural people in general and of those dependent on agriculture in particular.

It is not only ideologically that agriculture experienced marginalization in the popular imaginations of the Indian people over the last two decades; its share in the national income has also declined considerably. Though a large majority of Indians continue to live in the countryside, the share of agriculture to the national income has come down to less than a quarter. The growth rates in agricultural sector have also been much slower than other sectors of the economy.

Declining significance of agriculture, one would think, is quite “natural”, and perhaps a desirable process. With development of industry and modern servicing sectors, it has happened everywhere in the world. However, there is something quite unique about the Indian experience. Unlike other regions of the world, marginalization of agriculture in the Indian economy is not being accompanied by a similar degree of shift of population to non-agricultural employment. Given that India is a democratic country such a reality becomes even more challenging.

#### IV

##### **Liberalization and the Punjab economy**

Though liberalization and globalization were important turning points in the recent economic history of India, the “crisis” of Punjab agriculture, as mentioned above, was already evident by early 1980s, and had become a political issue in the state. Acknowledging that all was not well with the state of affairs in Punjab agriculture, the state government in 1985 appointed a committee under the chairmanship of Professor S.S. Johl, an agronomist, to look into the problems of the agrarian sector.

In the report submitted in 1986, the Johl committee expressed concern about stagnating productivity levels and deteriorating environment due to the cropping pattern dominated by paddy-wheat rotation. The committee recommended that if agriculture in Punjab was to be made sustainable, the farmers will have to be encouraged to diversify cropping pattern, switching over from high-volume and low-value crops to low-volume and high-value crops. However, given the overall political atmosphere in the state at that time, no concrete steps could be taken to implement the report.

Introduction of liberalization and globalization during the early 1990s further increased pressure of the agrarian economy. The “new” economic policy advocated withdrawal of the state from economic sphere, leaving it to the logic of market forces. While it might be a good thing for the industry to be allowed to freely import the latest technology from abroad or have a competitive atmosphere, leaving the agricultural sector to vagaries of free market could prove disastrous. Small landholders cultivate most of the land in India and they often have to borrow from various sources for investments in the cultivation of cash crops. The cycle of agricultural production is such that virtually the entire farm yield comes to the market simultaneously. In a completely free and open market, the indebted small cultivator would obviously find it hard to bargain with the mighty trader<sup>5</sup>. The support price regime for food grain crops had been a great help to the farmers.

Notwithstanding the shift in economic policies, the agrarian lobby was able to prevail and the support price regime was not withdrawn. However, procurement agencies became lackluster and began to show lethargy in procuring crops from farmers. With the extension of Green Revolution to other parts of India, the demand for food grains from Punjab also declined. Thus, even when the support price regime continued, the central government no longer raised the support prices much in the subsequent years.

This was most visible during the paddy procurement season of the year 2000. There had been a bumper crop of paddy in the state with no natural calamities like untimely rains or floods. But when the crop was brought to the *mandis* (marketing centres) the farmers were surprised to find that procurement agencies were not willing to buy their grains at the minimum support price declared by the central government. The officials claimed that

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<sup>5</sup> There have been several reports on the growing indebtedness of the Punjab farmers, particularly those of small and marginal farmers. Their sources for borrowings are invariably informal, generally the arhtias (the commission agent) in the grain market, which obviously makes their bargaining position weak. See Shergill 1998; Bose 2000.

they could not buy the paddy because it was of inferior quality. The FCI (Food Corporation of India) chief went to the extent of saying that as much as 80 percent of the Punjab paddy was spoilt – a claim that had no scientific basis. Indeed the FCI officials rarely conducted any tests while rejecting a particular lot of paddy even when they were provided with the kits to carry out such tests<sup>6</sup>.

Interestingly, private traders and rice millers were quite willing to buy the same paddy but at a price much lower than the official support price, which would have hardly met the farmers' costs for production of the crop. In the given situation many farmers eventually sold their paddy to traders. The traders paid them Rs. 400 to Rs. 450 per quintal for the "super fine" variety of paddy against the official support price of Rs. 550. For the common variety of paddy, traders were payed them Rs. 350 to Rs 400 per quintal against the official support price of Rs. 510<sup>7</sup>. Some traders reportedly sold the same paddy to official agencies at the minimum support price a few weeks later.

Many farmers, however, choose to wait with their grains in the *mandis* for the official agencies, in some cases for over two weeks. Local newspapers during the month of October 2000 were splashed with pictures of paddy piled up in the *mandis* and farmers sleeping over them. 'The grain was everywhere' and *mandis* were overflowing with heaps of paddy. Paddy was being downloaded wherever the farmers could find room – on roads, in school grounds, in public parks<sup>8</sup>. The farmers were obviously depressed and angry, perhaps more depressed than angry! As a newspaper report states:

Though the farmer's anger is coming to a boil, his attitude towards the government officials is, surprisingly, the very reverse. With folded hands, he pleads with them to lift his produce, at times virtually falling at their feet to grant him a "remunerative" rate. A telling symbol of the vice-like grip that the market binds him in<sup>9</sup>.

Farmers were at the mercy of officials! "It is blood and toil for six months and we cannot afford to annoy the officials. The money we earn during these days will provide for our family during the next six months as well as help us purchase

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<sup>6</sup> H. Jaisingh 'Growing Frustration of Kisan: Agriculture Needs Fresh Strategy' *The Tribune*, Chandigarh. October 11, 2000

<sup>7</sup> As reported by Lalit Mohan in *The Tribune*, October 10, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> As reported by Bajinder Pal Singh, *The Indian Express* October 5, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> As reported by Bajinder Pal Singh, *The Indian Express* October 6, 2000

fertilisers for the forthcoming wheat crop”, a farmer in the Khanna Mandi, Asia’s biggest grain market, told Bajinder Pal Singh, a newspaper reporter. However, not all of them could wait or bear the humiliation. There were several reports on the front pages of local newspapers during the month of October 2000 of the small and marginal farmers taking the extreme step of committing suicide out of frustration and humiliation.

## V

### **Indebtedness and Suicides**

Marginalization of agriculture has had many far reaching implications for the farming population of the region and elsewhere. There has been a general stagnation of agricultural sector over the last decade or so. The available analyses show that by early 1990s, paddy and wheat had already reached peak level of productivity in Punjab (Government of Punjab 2004:39). According to the *Economic Survey of Punjab 2003-04*, the primary sector of Punjab economy registered a negative growth at the rate of minus 2.38 percent over the preceding year (2002-03). The share of agriculture sector to the gross state domestic product has also declined significantly from 33.06 percent in 1993-94 to 24.43 percent in 2002-03 (page 45). More focused studies carried-out by economists also show that over the last decade or so, cash expenditure on crop production has been steadily rising for different crops. The compound growth rate of cash expenditure between 1974-75 and 1991-92 was nearly 9 percent for wheat and more than 11 percent for rice, two of the main crops grown by Punjab farmers (Shergill 1998:3).

Much of this growth in expenditure has been a direct result of the increasing use of commercial inputs by the farmers of Punjab, such as pesticides, fertilizers and seeds. Since all these inputs are purchased with cash, farmers of Punjab have to invariably invest a substantial amount of cash in every crop. Given that their own resources are limited, they invariably have to borrow, either directly from the market, or via the commission agents through whom they sell the yields of their farm. In some cases the situation has become so desperate that local farmers have put boards outside their villages stating “the village is on sale”<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> These villages are Harkishanpura in Bhatinda district and Shergarh in Mukatsar district. As in Gill S.S. 2004)

Some recent studies carried-out by economists in different parts of the state provide us with abundant evidence of growing economic hardships of the cultivators of Punjab. A study carried out by H.S. Shergill during the middle of 1990s found that as many as 86 percent of the respondent farmers had to routinely borrow from various credit agencies for short-term investment on crops. Nearly 27 percent of all farmers borrowed for capital investments in farm machinery.

In terms of dependence on borrowed money, the smaller landholders were clearly in a much weaker position than bigger landholders. Though the bigger farmers also frequently borrowed for short and long-term investments on land, many of them also had savings. The average per acre outstanding debt of the small farmers worked out to be Rs. 3,396 as against Rs. 1,398 and Rs. 1,599 for the medium and big farmers, respectively. As I have discussed below, other studies, carried-out more recently, have found the levels of indebtedness much higher.

It is rather interesting to note that despite official efforts at making institutional credit available to the cultivators, a significant proportion of short term borrowings (61.31 percent) by all categories of farmers were from the commission agents in grain markets, the *arhtias*. As many as 63.85 percent farmers regularly borrowed from them. The Primary Co-operative Credit Societies came next from where 51.31 percent of the farmers borrowed for their short-term credit needs. Only 8.85 percent of the farmers borrowed from commercial banks for short-term investments in land (Shergill 1998).

Another study by a team led by Sucha Singh Gill found that the indebtedness of the surveyed farmers who had committed suicide in the Malwa sub-region of Punjab was in the range of Rs 10,000 and Rs 6.5 lakh and the average outstanding debt was Rs 1.25 lakh per farmer household<sup>11</sup>.

More recently, Singh *et. al* (2005) in their study of six villages selected from different sub-regions of the state found that as many as 78.40 percent of all the farm households in Punjab were under debt. Only those with large holdings were relatively free from debts. Average outstanding debt of their sample population worked out to be as high as Rs. 92,394 of which nearly 58 percent had been borrowed from non-institutional sources. The extent and the nature of debt of course varied across different categories of farmers. While

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<sup>11</sup> *The Tribune* October 21 2000

the absolute amount of outstanding debt with the marginal and small farmers was lesser (Rs 17,465 and Rs. 43,598 respectively), the share of non-institutional debt in their outstanding debt was much higher (74 and 70 percent, respectively).

This study also confirmed the overall domination of *arhtias* in the local credit market. *Arhtias* accounted for as much as 50.51 percent of all the outstanding debt with their respondent farmers. Some other studies, such as by Gill (2000) and Kaur (2002) also found *arhtias* being the major source of credit for farmers of Punjab. There are obvious reasons for *arhtias* being so dominant in the local credit markets. The available institutional credit was simply not enough. The *arhatias* fulfilled the gap in availability of credit from institutional sources and the total demand for credit in rural Punjab (Gill 2004). *Arhtia's* credit also involved lesser paper work and other bureaucratic hassles.

Singh *et al.* (2005) in their study also looked at the purpose of borrowing. Money was borrowed for both “productive” (41 percent) and “unproductive” (59 percent) purposes. Though all categories of farmers borrowed heavily for “social” needs, the share of “unproductive” borrowings was highest amongst marginal farmers (71 percent) and comparatively lesser amongst large farmers (48 percent). Nearly half of the money borrowed for “unproductive” purposes was spent on marriages and other social functions.

The cost of informal credit is almost always higher than that of the institutional credit. The *arhtias* typically charge a monthly interest of 2 to 3 percent. Further, as was underlined by the classical literature on agrarian social structure in India (Bhardwaj 1974; Bhaduri 1984; Bardhan and Rudra 1978), informal credit invariably comes with other demands and pressures, i.e., the interlocking of credit with the product market. Though the context of contemporary Punjab agriculture is no longer semi-feudal in any sense of the term, the informal credit market is invariably tied to the product market. An indebted farmer has to not only compulsively produce for the market but has also to sell his produce to/through the *arhatia* to whom he is indebted. Anita Gill's study found as many as 84 percent of the sample households in Patiala district and 51 percent in Amritsar district being interlinked borrowers (Gill 2004: 3746). It may be useful to end this section with a quote from her study:

On the whole... informal lenders have survived despite all proclaimed policy measures. Their guise has changed to a lender, whose principal activity is not money lending. Rather, credit contracts are now interlinked with contracts in other markets.

In the study area, it is the sale of crop (i.e., output) which is interlinked with credit and the arhtiya has emerged as the main informal lender. By shifting to a better collateral (crop, instead of land), these lenders have not only strengthened their bargaining power in their principal activity, but are also able to exploit the borrowers to the hilt by charging exorbitant rates of interest. And yet, borrowers are forced to turn to them because formal credit is not only inadequate, availing it is also a cumbersome process, involves ownership of land explicitly or implicitly, and a sizeable class of cultivators cannot offer much land for loans. A lower rate of interest in formal market, then, is hardly any incentive (Gill, A 2004: 3748).

As has happened in some other parts of India, Punjab too experienced an increase in cases of suicides by farmers and landless labourers during the decade of 1990s. The available literature tends to point to a clear link between the increasing economic hardships of the rural people, particularly the smaller farmers and landless labourers, and the growing numbers of suicides.

According to an internal report prepared by the Department of Agriculture of the state government in 2004, though the phenomenon of farmers' suicides started sometime during the 1980s, it witnessed a sudden increase during the 1990s. The situation became alarming when in one year, i.e., 1997, as many as 418 cases of suicides were reported from rural Punjab. The report identified a total of 2116 cases of reported suicides since mid 1980s, and recognized that 'these figures were only of reported acts and many must have gone unrecorded'. Further, it underlines some interesting facts about these suicides. They were mostly concentrated in the Malwa districts of Sangrur, Bhatinda, Ferozepur, Mansa and Faridkot. More than 70 percent of those who killed themselves were small/marginal farmers or landless labourers. In most cases agriculture was their only source of livelihood. A large majority of them were engaged in cultivation of wheat and paddy crops (65 percent) or in wheat and cotton (20 percent). More than 70 percent of them came from Jat caste, and with the exception of one, they were all males, from a relatively younger age group.

The report also recognized that because of the declining growth rates, agriculture was no longer profitable, and the cultivators had no alternative sources of employment available to them. This scenario led to rising debts. However, in some cases conspicuous consumption and drug addiction were also important factors that led to chronic indebtedness of those who committed suicide.

Another study conducted by Institute of Development and Communication (IDC) also pointed to a sudden increase in cases of suicides in Punjab. The number of suicides committed in Punjab experienced a sharp rise from the year 1992-93. In 1992-93 suicides in Punjab increased by a staggering 51.97 percent while the comparable figure for the country as a whole was only 5.11 percent. In the years 1993-94 the increase was 14 percent in Punjab as against 5.88 percent for the country. While there was a decline in the reported cases of suicides at the all-India level, the state of Punjab once again reported an increase of 57 percent in 1994-95. The IDC report also recognized the fact that there was always a possibility of underreporting of suicides (IDC: 1998).

Further, this study also pointed to the suicides being concentrated in certain pockets of the state. The most suicide prone district in Punjab has been Sangrur from where as many as 22.39 percent of all the suicides were reported that occurred during 1988-1997. Another study reported that within Sangrur also, it was from certain blocks that most of the cases were reported. There were 12 specific villages in Lehragaga, Andana and Barnala blocks of the Sangrur district where most of the suicides had occurred (Iyer and Manick 2000).

Though IDC study recognized the presence of a link between indebtedness and suicides, the explanations offered for the indebtedness of those who committed suicide is at variance from the official report and some other studies.

According to the IDC study, the contemporary crisis of the Punjab agriculture emanated from a) limitations of the Green Revolution and lack of inner dynamism to build up forward and backward inter-sectoral linkages; b) decline in the size of operational holdings and fragmentation of land as well as pauperization of small and marginal farmers; c) decline in the growth rate of productivity; and d) increase in input costs and a corresponding fall in income of the small and marginal farmers.

Inferring from Shergill's study, IDC study also pointed to the fact that small and marginal farmers had a much higher share of debt. However, it does not give much weight to indebtedness *per se* as being the main factor that explained the increase in suicides. Of the causes identified by the IDC study, indebtedness came at number three. Only 41.50 percent of those who committed suicide were indebted. The corresponding figure for the "general sample" was 71.40 percent. The fact that "only 6 percent of the suicide victims had to sell land under the burden of debt"(p.69) implies, according to the IDC study, that the debt burden was not particularly severe. The IDC study tends to suggest that "social factors"

were much more determining while explaining the rural suicides in contemporary Punjab. The most important factor was “family discord” followed by “alcohol and illicit drug use”. Even indebtedness in most cases was “socially induced”. It may be worthwhile quoting from the study:

...greater proportion of the debt of the small and marginal farmers originated from loans taken for non-productive purposes.... a large amount of debt is socially induced among these sections. Sixty eight percent of the suicide victims’ families have a debt on them because of unproductive expenditure as compared to 20 percent of general households.

...A number of suicides were noticed among those for whom the use of credit for conspicuous consumption had aggravated the stress situation (pp36-37).

In contrast to the IDC study, Iyer and Manick (2000) treat the crisis of the agrarian economy and the growing indebtedness of farmers as the foremost cause of increase in suicides in the rural Punjab. They make a crucial distinction between the “causative” and “precipitant” factors while explaining these suicides. While the precipitant factors could be social and psychological, the causative factors, in most cases, were economic (primarily indebtedness). According to them, the causative factors are the ones that produce those social conditions under which an individual begins to feel insecure and helpless.

In their sample, nearly 79 percent of those who committed suicides came from poor families – mostly marginalized farmers or landless labourers. Only around six percent of those who committed suicides were free from debts and most of them had borrowed money from informal sources, generally from the *arhtias*. In some cases, drug addiction and marital disputes also became causative factors, but these factors were not as critical for them as they were for the IDC study. Similarly, though indebtedness was a crucial and determining factor, by itself it could not be a sufficient cause for committing suicide. In most cases, it was the loss of honour and constant experience of humiliation at the hands of lenders that seemed to have “precipitated” them to take such an extreme step.

## VI

### Explaining the Crisis of Agriculture

As mentioned above, one of the major implications of the shift in economic priorities during the early 1990s was a near complete marginalization of the rural society and agrarian economy in the popular discourses in India. However, the sudden spurt in suicides by farmers in different parts of the country has brought agriculture back to the public arena. Academics, activists and policy makers are all talking about agriculture once again. However, this time agriculture is not being talked about in the manner in which it was during the early decades after Independence, when the farmer was presented as a food-giver, selfless and hard working, a symbol of national pride. Unfortunately, it is in the context of an unprecedented crisis of the agrarian sector, reflecting itself in seemingly unending reports of suicides by farmers, mostly from regions that had experienced agricultural development during the decades of 1960s and 1970s that agriculture is being talked about in India today.

Apart from public outcry on the subject, some scholars have also been looking into analyzing this phenomenon. Though overlapping significantly in their orientation and arguments, we can identify broadly different sets of perspectives in the current writings on the crisis of agriculture.

First and foremost is, what could be described as, “**the thesis of neglect**”. According to this line of argument, the crisis of agriculture is a direct offshoot of the shift in priorities during the early 1990s. Growing obsession with the so-called “new economy”, information technology, media and the urban consumers led to a complete marginalization of the “rural” and agrarian sector. The policies of economic liberalization, according to this perspective, also required the state to open-up all sectors of the Indian economy to global market. Following this line of argument Chandrasekhar and Ghosh write:

Public agricultural extension services have all but disappeared, leaving farmers to the mercy of private dealers of seed and other inputs such as fertilizer and pesticides who function without adequate regulation, creating problems of wrong crop choices, excessively high input prices, spurious inputs and extortion. Public crop marketing services have also declined in spread and scope, and marketing margins imposed by private traders have therefore increased. All this happened over a period when

farmers were actively encouraged to shift to cash crops, away from subsistence crops which involved less monetised inputs and could ensure at least consumption survival of peasant households (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2004).

This neglect of agriculture and rural economy has affected not only the farming communities but also the landless labourers who, because of the crisis in agriculture, are finding it much more difficult to find employment on viable wage. Commenting on this process, Jayati Ghosh writes:

The complete collapse of rural incomes or job opportunities has created an almost unprecedented situation of desperation among the landless, who rely exclusively on wage labour to survive. Some of this problem originates further back, in the inadequate development of non-agricultural work opportunities in most of rural India. This was directly related to the decline in public expenditure on rural development, which had adverse multiplier effects on rural non-agricultural economic activity in general. More recently, farm-related activities such as dairy have been hit by the decline of cooperatives (some of them killed by official design) and the pattern of trade liberalization (Ghosh 2004).

The recent realization by policy makers in the Government of India also seem to be working with a similar kind of understanding of the crisis of agriculture.

The **second**, and perhaps more popular has been the thesis that links the rise in farmers' suicides to "**the crisis of ecology**" and "**disintegration of community**" caused by the new technology, and accentuated by globalization.

Commenting on the earlier crisis of militancy in Punjab, Vandana Shiva had, for example argued that the Green Revolution was not merely a technological innovation meant for increasing productivity of land and bringing prosperity to farmers. Its negative social consequences far exceeded its benefits. Green Revolution introduced a commercial culture in rural Punjab and destroyed the community. It changed social relations, from those based on mutual obligation to those based purely on the market principle. After the Green Revolution

Atomized and fragmented cultivators related directly to the state and the market. This generated on the one hand, an erosion of cultural norms and practices and on the other hand, it sowed the seeds of violence and conflict (Shiva 1991: 171).

More recently, she along with some others attributed the suicides by cotton farmers directly to the ecological crisis generated by the introduction of new economic policies associated with the globalization process.

The tragedy of farmers committing suicides for a couple of years in some states, highlights some of these high social and ecological costs which are linked to globalization of non-sustainable agriculture and which are not restricted to the cotton growing areas of various state but have been experienced in all commercially-grown and chemically-farmed crops in all regions. While the benefits of globalization go to the seeds and chemical corporations through expanding markets, the cost and risks are exclusively born by the small farmers and landless peasants (Shiva et. al.1999).

Elsewhere Shiva writes:

...as farming is delinked from the earth, the soil, the biodiversity, and the climate, and linked to global corporations and global markets, and the generosity of the earth is replaced by the greed of corporations, the viability of small farmers and small farms is destroyed. Farmers' suicides are the most tragic and dramatic symptom of the crisis of survival faced by Indian peasants (Shiva 2004).

Several other scholars have also tried to link the increase in farmers' suicides to a general breakdown of the ecological balance, disintegration of 'community' and kinship support system, and the rise of some kind of individualistic orientations brought in by the new technology and development philosophy to the Indian countryside (Ahalawat 2003; Vasavi 1999).

Some have also attributed the agrarian distress leading to suicides in Punjab to the generic **irrationality of the peasant**. The fact that in most cases the small and marginal farmers went into chronic indebtedness primarily because of "unproductive" borrowings (as discussed above) implies that they had not 'acquired Weberian rationality characteristic of modern capitalism'. Quoting Thomas and Znaniecki, Singh (2005) finds basic irrational traits among Punjab cultivators. Instead of investing their returns from agriculture in further expanding their capital base, he argues, the Punjab farmers tend to spend everything on 'consumer goods to seek physical and sensual gratification'. A similar kind of conclusion could also be inferred from the IDC study of farmers' suicides in Punjab discussed above.

There has also been another set of arguments that look at the current crisis of Indian agriculture as having been entirely a consequence of the new economic policy and globalization, which, according to this position is basically a **return to the colonial logic** of the global economic integration. The most vocal advocate of this approach has been Utsa Patnaik. She draws parallel between what happened during the colonial period when the Indian peasants were compelled to produce commercial crops like cotton, because the British needed it for the textile mills in England, and the current phase of globalization. As she argued in an interview given to a popular magazine (Patnaik 2004):

... lakhs of small farmers, were switching from food crops to cotton as the world prices were rising. Many of them had not cultivated cotton before.... There was this sudden expansion of area under cotton — these farmers could not afford to do so except on the basis of credit. They took loans and the amount of loans they took to produce cotton was much higher than they had taken in the past, as they would have grown rain-fed food crops on the same land, which would not have cost much for production. *So the switch to an exportable commercial crop led to a scenario of rising indebtedness* (emphasis added).

She continues:

...there is an interesting parallel that one can find with what happened during the cotton boom. In 1861, when the American Civil War broke out and supplies of raw cotton from the United States to the manufacturing centres in Britain and Europe were cut off, they turned to alternative sources of cotton and India was a major source. Suddenly the prices of global cotton went up and the Indian farmer, being always very price responsive, switched over from food crops to cash crops. Immediately, there was a huge expansion of areas growing cotton and a switch from food crops like jowar and ragi to cotton. In order to do so, they borrowed from the *sahukars* [moneylenders].

When the Civil War ended, the global prices crashed. The story repeats itself in 1996... But what happened was that when the people switched from food crops to cash crops, the food prices went up. With the crash in cotton prices, the farmers found that they could not pay the *sahukars*. And the *sahukars* began to foreclose the debts. This led to the Deccan Riots. What happened then was that the Indian

farmers actually took on the *sahukars* and unitedly fought against them, but this time they seem to be taking it out on themselves.

## VII

### **Beyond Crises**

The sudden spurt in cases of suicides by small and marginal farmers in different parts of India over the last couple of years has indeed created a sense of unprecedented crisis in Indian agriculture. The fact that this has happened simultaneously in different regions of India – from Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh to Maharashtra and Punjab – has understandably made social scientists, activists and policy makers wonder about the causes and connection that such a phenomenon may have with wider processes of change operating at the national/global levels.

The above discussed explanations offered by different scholars are certainly quite persuasive and make several useful suggestions about the prevailing state of affairs in Indian agriculture. However, when one looks at these arguments a little dispassionately, with a specific regional context in mind, one also begins to realize that the story of agrarian distress is perhaps a little more complex and complicated than what is made out to be in most of these “theses”.

First and foremost, the notion of agriculture and rural social structure that they all seem work with appears to be rather problematic. Even when vulnerability of small/ marginal farmers is underlined in most of these analyses, they seem to treat agriculture in totality, as a sector of the wider Indian economy, which has been pushed into crisis by various policy changes. The social context of agriculture, i.e., the village is also seen as a generalized category. Such populist frames tend to look at village in communitarian terms, viz. peasant communities that were hitherto living undisturbed in peace and harmony, and have suddenly been pushed into crisis by commercial capital and global markets. Such analyses thus end-up ignoring the internal differences of caste and class that are so obvious and important aspects of the Indian agrarian scene.

These analyses also tend to “over-generalize” about the nature of crisis and its causes, almost completely ignoring regional variations and diverse trajectories that mark the Indian agrarian scene today. Though globalization has indeed had many negative implications for the agrarian economy in general, the crisis of agriculture today is not being experienced in a similar way everywhere. A close look at contemporary Punjab, for example, clearly

shows that suicides were largely localized in certain pockets and only a few cases were reported from most other parts. The broader context of agrarian change also varies a great deal.

### **Emerging Scenario in Punjab Agriculture**

It may be worthwhile to go back the experience of agrarian change in contemporary Punjab in order to make sense of what is happening today.

The impact of Green Revolution was not confined to village/agriculture alone. It transformed virtually everything- society, culture, politics. The economic development experienced during the Green Revolution period also brought the villages closer to the city life and its economy. S.S. Gill had reported this process some twenty years back:

With the penetration of capitalist relations in agriculture, modern education has spread. Most of the Punjab villages have schools and some even have colleges functioning in them. Some of the capitalist farmers ...are actually sending them to urban centres to acquire better education. With this a large number of educated persons from rural areas have been coming forward to take up jobs in government and semi-government institutions and departments. This has produced a distinct category of middle class intellectuals of rural origin (Gill 1985).

This process has become further pronounced since Gill's observation some twenty years back. Most agricultural households in contemporary Punjab have become economically diversified. As Lindberg rightly points out, they are increasingly becoming pluri-active, 'standing between farming and other activities whether as seasonal labourers or small-scale entrepreneurs in the local economy.... Agriculture and farming is no more an all-encompassing way of life and identity' (Lindberg 2005:11).

The available official data on employment patterns in Punjab has also begun to reflect this process very clearly. As shown in Table 1 below the proportion of cultivators in the total number of main workers in Punjab declined from 46.56 in 1971 to 31.44 in 1991, and further to 22.60 by 2001. While the share of cultivators has been consistently falling, that of the agricultural labourers had been rising until the 1991 Census. However, over the last decade, viz. from 1991 to 2001, even their proportion declined significantly, from 23.82 to 16.30. In other words, though nearly 70 percent of Punjab's population still lives in rural areas, only around 39 percent of the main workers in the state were directly employed in agriculture. The comparable figure for the country as a whole was still above 58 percent.

Table 2, given below, further corroborates the point that Punjab agriculture is undergoing some interesting shifts. As shown in the table, total number of landholding in the state declined from 13,75,392 in 1971 to 10,27,127 in 1981. This decline of more than 3 lakh holdings obviously suggests a sudden move away from agriculture. While this process experienced a reversal during the 1980s, perhaps because of the Khalistan movement, it again seems to have gained momentum during the post-1990 period.

Who is moving out of agriculture? If we look at the Table 2 carefully, the decline is most clearly visible in the category of marginal land holdings (from 37.63 percent in 1970-71 to mere 18.65 in 1995-96) followed by small land holdings. There is a correspondent rise in the medium and large land holding over this period of 25 years or so.

Though average size of the holdings is growing in Punjab, the bigger farmer is not necessarily becoming more rural. While marginal and small cultivators seem to be moving out of agriculture, the bigger farmer is moving out of the village. The big farmers of Punjab invariably have a part of their families living in the town. Their children go to urban schools/ colleges, and they invest their surplus in non-agricultural activities.

Not only has there been a fragmentation of farming classes, the rural social structure has also undergone a near complete transformation over the last three or four decades. My recent study of changing caste relations in rural Punjab clearly reflects this process. As I have argued elsewhere (Jodhka 2002), commercialization and mechanization of agriculture on the one hand and introduction of democratic political process on the other have together transformed caste relations in rural Punjab quite fundamentally. Over the last twenty years or so large proportions of Dalits in Punjab have consciously dissociated themselves from their traditional occupations and have also been trying to distance them from everyday engagement with the agrarian economy, which were the sources of power for the locally dominant castes over them.

Their autonomization from the “traditional” rural economy and structures of patronage and loyalty has created a rather volatile situation. While the institutions supporting ideas and structures of hierarchy have nearly disintegrated, the upper castes have not yet shed their prejudice against the former “untouchable” groups. Nor have they yet reconciled to the changed ground realities. In the emerging scenario, local Dalits have begun to assert for equal rights and a share from the resources that belong commonly to the village and had so far been in the exclusive control of the locally dominant caste groups or individual households (Jodhka and Louis 2003; Jodhka 2004).

These processes of change have had a direct implication for the political agency of the farming classes in Punjab. The earlier solidarity of farmers reflected in their powerful mobilization during the 1980s is nowhere to be seen today. The Bhartiya Kisan Union (BKU), which had provided leadership to Punjab farmers during the 1980s, is split into four factions. Apart from the different factions of BKU, communist parties and other leftist groups also have their farmers' unions. Put together there are a total 10 different organization claiming to represent farmers' interests in Punjab (Gill S.S. 2004). Though some of them occasionally come together on common platform, most of the time they remain divided. This fragmentation of farmers' movement during the last decade or so can not be understood without referring to the growing internal differentiation within the landowning classes/ castes and the changing political and class balance at the local and regional level.

Further, the process of globalization/ shift in economic priorities, and consequent weakening of Indian state, have all played their role in making the farmers' politics less-effective. As in other parts of Asia, Green Revolution was primarily a state-driven programme. Liberalization and growing emphasis on withdrawal of state and growing involvement of corporate sector in agriculture has changed the opportunity structure of farmers' politics (Lindberg 2005). The moral high ground of Punjab's farmers as producers of food for the nation is lost when they are told to diversify into non-food grain crops that can find markets, locally and globally, without any help from the state.

Notwithstanding all these new trends, the change on ground is still limited. Farmers in Punjab, as elsewhere in India, continue to be an influential block. Populist politics often resorted to by the regional elite works to their advantage. This is quite evident from the available data on agricultural subsidies and the state policies during the last more than a decade of liberalization/globalization. In the case of Punjab, for example, after facing problems with procurement for some two years or so, crops were being procured again by the state agencies and the support prices have also been rising, albeit slowly. Instances of farmers committing suicides in rural Punjab have come down in the last couple of years, when compared with the decade of 1990s.

However, this is not to suggest that the crisis of Punjab agriculture is over. On the contrary, as is reflected in the literature on growing indebtedness, the challenges before the farmers of Punjab seem to be growing. The fact that smaller land holders are increasingly finding it hard to stay in agriculture, and are moving to other occupation clearly shows the nature of pressures the agriculturists in Punjab, as elsewhere in India, are confronted with. However,

one ought to also see it in relation to the larger changes being experienced at the village and regional levels, economic, social, cultural. This perhaps would enable us to raise more meaningful questions about what is happening to agriculture today.

**Table 1: Proportion of main workers engaged in agriculture in Punjab**

Category	1971	1981	1991	2001
Cultivators	42.56	35.86	31.44	22.6
Agri. Labourers	20.11	22.16	23.82	16.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>62.67</b>	<b>58.02</b>	<b>55.26</b>	<b>38.90</b>

Source: Human Development Report 2004 (Punjab) p.46; Census of India 2001 (www.censusindia.net)

**Table 2: Distribution of Operational Land Holdings**

Size-class (in hectares)	1970-71	1980-81	1990-91	1995-96
Marginal (0-1) (37.63)	517568 (19.21)	197323 (26.50)	296131 (18.65)	203876
Small (1-2)	260083 (18.91)	199368 (19.41)	203842 (18.24)	183453 (16.78)
Medium (2-4)	281103 (20.44)	287423 (27.99)	288788 (25.85)	320340 (29.31)
Large (4-10)	247755 (18.02)	269072 (26.20)	261481 (23.40)	305792 (27.98)
Extra-large (10 +)	68883 (5.00)	73941 (7.19)	67172 (6.01)	79612 (7.28)
<b>Total</b>	<b>1375392 (100)</b>	<b>1027127 (100)</b>	<b>1117414 (100)</b>	<b>1093073 (100)</b>

Source: Human Development Report 2004 (Punjab) p. 41.

**Table 3: Growth rates in different sectors of Punjab Economy**

Time-period	Industry	Agriculture	Livestock
1966-67 to 1979-80	8.22	3.18	6.10
1980-81 to 1990-91	9.12	4.87	5.70
1991-92 to 1998-99	8.49	0.37	5.10

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