On Women Surviving Farmer Suicides in Punjab

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How have women been coping in the aftermath of farmer suicides in Punjab? This article is based on detailed interviews with 32 women in three districts of the state. Accosting the reality of women caught in the vortex of the agrarian crisis, one painfully comes to terms with the newer hardships that the structures of marriage and family pose for them. Their reality and struggle compels the framing of new questions for the women’s movement and the seeking of novel forms of redress and strategies to overcome their plight.

1 Introduction

The spectre of farmers’ suicides across India compounds the plight of the agricultural population already suffering from impoverishment and destitution. The bitter struggle for survival by women in these families is fraught with obstacles of an unprecedented nature. Dependent on the hetero-patriarchal structures of marriage and family, women are left fending for themselves, their children, the elderly, as well as dealing with the wrath and harassment of bank and commission agents. In addition, they are coping with crop failures, negative rates of return from farming, meeting essential expenses (for instance, school fees of their children), illnesses and other emergencies, as also, various chores, like tending to livestock.

The number of suicides in Maharashtra has touched 1,31,040 over the period 1993-2006.1 Other major states include Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Punjab. Although there is considerable published work on the phenomenon of farmer suicides in India, we need to know more about its impact on women and families who cope with the aftermath. The deepening stranglehold of patriarchy on women’s lives ushered in by policies of liberalisation in a rapidly changing economy on the one hand and the implications and challenges it throws up for the women’s movement on the other pushed me to begin documenting these changes by means of a survey. As part of a detailed ongoing study, this article is based on a survey of 32 women in three districts of Punjab. Accosting the reality of these women caught in the vortex of the agricultural crisis, one painfully comes to terms with the newer hardships that the structures of marriage and family pose for women in today’s changing economy. Outlining these social and economic changes helps one take stock of how women are renegotiating vis-a-vis these institutions in current times. Their reality and struggle defies any existing critique of patriarchy in the context of this country, further complicating the feminist vision of a life of dignity and equality for women. Instead, it compels us to frame new questions and seek novel forms of redress and strategies for the majority of women caught in a deepening agrarian crisis.

2 Farmer Suicides in Punjab: An Overview

2.1 Agrarian Distress in Punjab

Punjab is in the grip of an acute agrarian crisis. Both research and ground reality show how it is the green revolution and the measures undertaken then that led to the rapid deterioration of soil conditions, increased demand for high-cost pesticides and fertilisers, and a network of institutional funding that extended...
to non-institutional sources too; the latter subsequently brought almost the entire of the farming community into the vicious grip of indebtedness. K C Suri shows how a large number of suicides have been reported from states that are relatively agriculturally developed, witnessed strong peasant movements, and where the leadership of political parties has come predominantly from farming communities.\(^2\) And till date, people’s response to farmer suicides in Punjab therefore is met with shock and disbelief. A report\(^3\) brought out by the Punjab State Farmers’ Commission confirms how since the late 1990s in particular there has been declining productivity, increasing costs and declining profitability. The number of marginal and small farmers that was 5 lakh in Punjab in 1991 declined to 3 lakh in 2001. Finding it hard to live on farming alone, they leave farming. The number seems to have declined further since 2001. This shift in the rural economy from the agricultural sector to the non-agricultural sector is of major concern as there is a very low growth rate in the secondary and tertiary sectors.\(^4\) The rise in the numbers of those who are leasing out is not fully accounted for – small and marginal farmers who are increasingly giving away the scarce and tiny landholdings on rent to bigger farmers. However, there is considerable unemployment in the rural economy that official unpublished estimates indicate: 24 lakh in the rural sector from a total of 35 lakh persons unemployed in Punjab.\(^5\)

The impact of these paradigm shifts has a bearing on the social fabric that is largely not studied or looked into as yet. And that is the point of intervention that this study attempts to assess the situation of survivors in families. A steady increase in farmer suicides over the years clearly reveals the dehumanising conditions faced by these families and their reliance on debt – both from institutional and non-institutional sources – to eke out an existence. The proportion of indebted farm households has been found to be 88.33% in Punjab.\(^6\) However, the picture of the exact number of suicides in Punjab is yet to emerge clear.\(^7\) A study done by Bharatiya Kisan Union (Bhu-Ku-Ekta) shows that between 2001 and 2005, 13,000 farmers committed suicide. The major reasons turn out to be increased indebtedness, harassment by bank agents and artiyas, crop failure, and desperation at the lack of viable solutions. Loss of pride and humiliation felt by farmers in the sale of land makes them vulnerable to suicide; this study also covers families where suicides have taken place among landless labourers too. The breakdown of the agrarian system has led to acute distress among them, dependent as they are on wage labour in the agricultural economy. Landless labourers are now perennially short of income to meet the most basic needs. Of course, the number of suicides among them is relatively far less but their struggle for survival must be more tough.

The perils of capital-intensive agriculture are evident in many ways from both a discussion with families on agricultural processes and practices as well as from other studies. Farmers are cornered from many sides by the high price of fertilisers and seeds, cheap imports, withdrawal of state support, the vagaries of rainfall due to climatic changes caused by global warming, and a host of other conditions. The possibilities of diversified agriculture are limited as the primary means of repayment of loans is the cultivation of cash crops. The lending institutions, private moneylenders, and dealers of fertilisers, seeds and pesticides are of course prospering.

### 2.2 Suicides: Circumstances and Causes

Consuming pesticide is the most common method while a few people resort to drowning or sometimes hanging. While there is a wide array of issues surrounding their deepening frustration and anxiety related to indebtedness, the immediate trigger effect can be anything like the last straw on the camel’s back. Getting nothing in return from the sale of crops after back-breaking labour (a bank or an artiya or both at times deduct all pending interest), a conflict at home, abject humiliation in public due to harassment of the artiya, bank agents, or other private village moneylenders, sale of all land, fresh debts incurred by a sister’s or daughter’s marriage – all these contribute to taking the extreme step.

Najam Singh in Mansa district committed suicide in the year 2000 by drowning. He had got his sister married and his younger brother too and his loans were over Rs 3 lakh. When the artiya refused to give him more loans, he simply committed suicide. Mithu Singh of the same district consumed poison on 2 January 2004 after returning from a meeting with the artiya. He sold his land and got nothing from the artiya as it was considered to be loan repayment. He simply could not take the humiliation and the poverty. Jasbeer Singh from Sangrur district owned 3.5 acres and his debts were over Rs 3 lakh, including the purchase of a truck on loan. He was unable to pay the instalments. The recovery agent had come to his house that day and claimed the truck back. They drove the truck away, which skidded and fell near a pit. Jasbeer Singh was returning home when he saw this from a distance. He rushed to his room and consumed the dreaded “spray” (pesticide) – from humiliation or hopelessness or both perhaps. That was in 2001.

In August 2005, 23-year-old Dhyan Singh in Sangrur district came from the fields complaining that his stomach was hurting badly. He had already consumed the “spray”. It was too late to save him. He had a loan of Rs 60,000 already and was trying to take a fresh loan. The marriage expenses of his sister were weighing on Dhyan Singh’s mind before his suicide. Of course, within a month of her son’s death, the mother took another loan of Rs one lakh for agricultural purposes. With the help of this new loan she paid part of the earlier loan and also got her daughter married. Life has to continue and responsibilities fulfilled, she said. In 2007, 31-year-old Satnam Singh of Ferozepur district consumed poison. Although the couple has been married for more than 10 years and was also greatly troubled by their childlessness, the situation was triggered by his sister’s wedding, which obliged him to arrange for the dowry money. That was only four months before the suicide.

Quite obviously, it is a complex range of factors that have been driving farmers to committing suicide, irrespective of what triggers the act. There is a taboo on wage work; the imperative of safeguarding the honour of the community of Jat Sikhs\(^8\) acts as the biggest debilitating factor. As debts increase, the land owned dwindles in size, and crops fail, the means to survive elude farmers completely. And then, the hypocrisy of social mores further deepens their inability to get out of debt, whether it is dowry or marriage expenses. The desperation of coming to terms with a bleak future for their children despite working hard all round the year is obvious.
as almost all women had this as the uppermost concern. What will happen to our children, they ask at the end of each interview.

3 Impact on Women

3.1 Women’s Labour

The restriction on women’s mobility restricts almost all Jat Sikh women from taking on wage work, except in a couple of rare cases. Despite getting pushed into indebtedness and without often being able to clear the principal amount, they are in no position to think of wage work. This internalised taboo also prevents them from seeing any other future for their daughters other than marriage, ensuring, in turn, the drudgery of housework and other additional responsibilities for the next generation of women too. There is nothing conducive to encourage them either to look for work, if at all it is available. This can happen only from the intervention of mass organisations and peasant unions as it upsets the caste restrictions completely. Forming cooperatives or trying income-generating schemes does not seem to have been attempted here. Of course, whether they were earning money or not, all women without exception are engaged in intense domestic work round the clock. And there are many, especially among Rai Sikhs, who combine agricultural work in the small land they possess along with a bit of wage work to make ends meet.

Harjeet Kaur’s family in Ferozepur district earns around Rs 40,000 per year from cultivating an acre of land as well as engaging in wage labour. Her eldest son committed suicide in 2008, depressed as he was with farm labour and an anxiety-ridden existence. Often bad health prevents women from being able to take on work and deep anxiety further worsens their health. Kulvinder Kaur from Ferozepur district seems to be in complete charge of everything after the death of her son. She is working more than 12 hours a day, she said, despite bad health and a few surgeries. She looks after her husband and ailing father-in-law as well as the hired labourers. There is no time to grieve for her son. Lakhbir Rani from the same district would like to take on work as she is left with four children after her husband’s death in November 2008. Battling with cancer for two years now, she is too weak to do anything.

Davinder Kaur’s husband earned roughly Rs 4,000 each month by working at the local bus stand announcing arrivals and departures. He committed suicide in 2003. His land was very unproductive; the water level has gone down sharply in this block in Sangrur district and investing in submersible pumps is costly. He had taken a loan of Rs 2 lakh for his daughter’s marriage and had to take another loan from a cooperative to return that loan and meet other expenses. It is impossible to sell the land even if they want to because the area is drought prone. Davinder Kaur said, “I have nothing left. I even sold off the gas cylinder for money. I cannot work anymore. I do not keep well. I have terrible joint pains all the time.” Her son was at home, silent and lost in his own world. He had been to Sangrur in the morning for a constable recruitment test and had been rejected. Both mother and son looked very anxious, uncertain about their future. They see no hope.

A 60-year-old woman from Mansa district, who is a Majhabi Sikh, had lost her son in 2003. She now works as a part time sweeper in a nearby municipal office earning Rs 750 per month. However, she spends Rs 8 every day for bus fare, which comes to Rs 200 per month. She works on daily wages too for Rs 50 per day. The family’s annual income is roughly Rs 20,000 as it includes the husband’s daily wages too; he gets Rs 70 a day, typically during the peak season when wage work is available for a short period. Most women like her get such work for a maximum of three months a year, at the time of both paddy and wheat harvesting. She says it does not suffice; the family is always short of money despite working so hard. She had begun life when daily wages were Rs 10 per day.

Jaspal Kaur from Ferozepur district earns a pittance from daily wage work. Her husband committed suicide in 1994 and her father-in-law even earlier. She is landless now and earns barely Rs 12,000 a year. “I tell my son to work and earn but he is intoxicated half the time. He earns just a little money,” she said. She picks cotton or gaajar – making around Rs 50 per day. She barely gets work 60 days a year. She cannot even afford a buffalo; otherwise she could have earned from sale of milk, she said.

It is the Majhabi and Ramdasia Sikh women who work on daily wages and seem proud of it too. One or two Jat Sikh women expressed their longing to do such work. One of them said she would be ostracised from her village the day she did wage work. In one case, a 65-year-old Jat Sikh woman who has nobody to look after her has resorted to wage work. She has defied caste norms since there is no one left in her family. She earns Rs 450 per month making cow dung, Rs 300 from someone who owns 12 buffaloes, and Rs 150 from someone with five buffaloes. The work is intense for her age, though she is over with it by 12 noon. But her hands were completely bruised with deep cuts. She said she would like to do cotton picking to augment her income but her sore hands do not permit it.

Taking time for an interview that was invariably over an hour was not easy for almost all women as they are engaged in intense domestic labour. Tending to livestock and milking the cows or buffaloes takes a good part of the morning. Housework is part of their daily mundane activity, but they do not refer to it as work. Cooking and serving others three times a day, washing clothes and dishes takes a good part of the day. Cleaning the house and courtyard and making cow dung continues. Looking after the elderly is a regular feature in many houses; in some there were in-laws who were bedridden, requiring constant nursing and attention. The reality of a society with patrilocal families hits hard as one discusses work and responsibilities with these women. There is deference to the elders and hushed voices as they continue to be the bahus. Since the seeming protection of a man or any semblance of intimacy that comes with the institution of marriage is denied, it seems as though the times have even made the “labour for love” myth dated in the villages of Punjab. The identification of women with the family and housework remains uncannily intact with the traditional burden that a patriarchal set-up foists on them. Here it is a curious mixture of both as well as coping with a set of newer responsibilities of running fatherless families.

3.2 Marriage Costs

The devaluation of women in the state is apparent with Punjab leading the figures in declining sex ratios. The sex ratio in Punjab
as per the 2001 Census data is 876 females per 1,000 males while the national average is 933. It is not a surprise that more than half the families interviewed had a consistent pattern of two sons only or a single son in fewer cases. The prominent reason for the declining sex ratio is because people simply cannot afford to bring girls into this world. At a time when agriculture has become unviable and when caste is a significant barrier to trying other earning options, girls are viewed as a liability because of the dowry that one has to pay even if bankruptcy is imminent. The poor in Punjab are paying a heavy price in the form of dowry; many suicides are related either directly or indirectly to increased indebtedness because of this burden. In a situation of total helplessness, debts are incurred to install a tube well, purchase land or an electric pump, meet the expenses of weddings and the demands of a dowry. Even for families where suicides have taken place, the minimum expectation of the amount of dowry was Rs 2 lakh; landless households have to pay over Rs 60,000 in such marriage settlements.

Within a month of her son’s death, a mother in Sangrur district had to take a loan of Rs 1 lakh. She has to pay Rs 12,000 every six months in return. With the help of this loan she paid the earlier loan and also got her daughter married. She had to purchase some gold too. It was the marriage expenses of his sister that were weighing on her son’s mind when he took his life. But his mother told us that there was no other option but to take loan to return the principal of the earlier loan and get the daughter married. Others present on the spot added that many people do this. Her daughter was at home in the last few weeks of her pregnancy. The mother plans to spend money on the grandchild before sending the daughter to her in-laws. She says it is a *paramapara*, “you have to do this much”. The expense will come from the current loan they are living on.

Baljit Singh of Sangrur district had taken a huge loan, but was unable to repay it as his earnings were far from sufficient. He had five sisters; he got three of them married with dowry. It was his responsibility; his father had got the other two sisters married. He sold 1.5 acres of land and also took a loan of Rs 2,09,000 from a private finance company.

Women, whose husbands have committed suicide, have also been taking loans more than once in order to get their daughters married. Baljit Kaur’s husband committed suicide in 2001 after selling 1.5 acres of his land in order to repay part of the principal he owed to the moneylender. After his suicide, she took a loan of Rs 2 lakh. She released one acre of land that was mortgaged and also managed to get her elder daughter married. She said that a very simple marriage along with the minimum gold required costs at least Rs 2 lakh, which she now needs for the second daughter. But “I cannot keep up with loan repayment anymore”, she said, even as she showed us the papers of the new loan sanctioned to her.

Despite participating in every household activity and helping with livestock and crops, daughters are viewed as burdens as there is no salvation unless one mobilises the requisite amount of money for a dowry to get them married. Harpreet Kaur in Mamdot block of Ferozepur district has three teen-aged daughters; her only son had committed suicide. Their debts are over Rs 3.5 lakh and constantly increasing. Though she manages to get at least Rs 60,000 per year from the three acres of land that are cultivated, almost the entire sum goes towards interest payments on the loans. The principal amount remains intact. The mother, along with the daughters and their father are engaged in agricultural labour. Yet she is most worried about her daughters’ weddings and wonders how they can be eligible for a loan again as there is no other way to get them married. “Hamein phir karz milega kya?”, she is most keen to know.

The sending of money to the daughter’s house continues even after marriage. The birth of a grandchild means spending more money. Sonu Kaur from Mansa district is a dalit landless labourer with a debt of Rs 50,000. Her son committed suicide in 2003 out of sheer despair because of the burden of debt and three sisters to marry. One of the daughters is now demanding Rs 30,000 for a wedding in her family and tells her mother that she should not otherwise come to her house.

Preet Kaur from Mansa district had taken a loan of Rs 1.5 lakh for the marriage of her eldest daughter; she has two more daughters to marry and will have to take a loan again. However, meeting the wedding expenses of a son is also impossible without getting into debt or selling assets. She had to sell two buffaloes at Rs 45,000 to get her son married. That stopped the income coming from the sale of milk that would augment the Rs 20,000 she gets each year from cultivation (she has an acre of land).

Having no land left is the biggest humiliation the family of Parminder Kaur is facing within the village and the community in Sangrur district. Her three sons now work as daily wagers. No son is married or is likely to get married; no one is willing to give their daughters to a man who has no land. This further aggravates their humiliation at being ostracised from the community. The sons earn up to Rs 70 to 80 per day. But there is no certainty of finding work every month. Parminder is also deeply concerned and shameful of the fact that she cannot get her sons married. Her husband sold off all his land to repay debts and committed suicide after that in 2000.

Marriage as a marker of social respectability is still not eroded – one of our biggest failures in the women’s movement. It is ironic that there is such validation of *kanyadaan* – the iron hold of cultural conditioning in the rural poor – through dowries and grand ceremonies. It is tragic that sanity and identity are salvaged through a cruel cultural practice that consumes the lives of the providers of dowry and gives sleepless nights to many a poor household. Dowry is aggravating the situation in many ways, one of them being the alarming decline in the sex ratio.

Interestingly, the mother-in-law of a woman being interviewed in Ferozepur district added most enthusiastically how she got her two daughters married in the mid-1980s without any dowry because of the ban imposed on dowry by militants of the Khalistani movement. By and large, no groom or groom’s family had the nerve then to accept any dowry or gifts during that period. Almost all peasant unions today in Punjab are campaigning against lavish weddings and dowry. We in the women’s movement too need to relook at dowry under this new regime of retrenchment, factory closure, joblessness, displacement and farmers’ suicides in epidemic proportions. All of us need to come closer to the reality of today’s young generation of women, especially the women from the industrial working class, the urban poor and the peasantry.
### 3.3 Transition from Childhood

The extent of indebtedness and farmers taking recourse to suicide leave in its wake hundreds of fatherless families. The children of these families seemed unique too – unlike most children of their age and yet displaying the same innocence and vulnerability. Most school-going children seemed far more serious and often a bit grim too. In many houses, the children were with books doing work from school, having a quiet meal, or simply listening to us quietly. Most mothers stated how cooperative the children were and how obedient too. Most women confirmed that the children do respect the authority of their mothers. The older children, especially girls, were poignantly aware of what we were discussing. In a couple of rare cases, the girls joined in too. Otherwise, largely they keep quiet.

Baljit Singh, aged 45, in Sangrur district has two sons. One of them is severely mentally-challenged and she sees no hope for him. Her second son who is around 16 or 17 years, studies in a private school. This son is, almost all the time, tense and quiet after coming from school. Baljit is very worried for his health and well-being – that he too does not become depressed or bogged down by the gloomy scenario. She said, “I only want my children to be left alone. They also will not be able to repay our debt. What will happen to them? This second son is my only hope. Even if I do not exist, I want him to live.”

In Ferozepur there was a suicide in November 2008. The man faced continuous harassment by both the artiya and bank agents – it was very humiliating, his father told us in tears. Constant financial difficulties, the harassment of agents, the children's education, etc, used to worry him all the time. The children had to be removed from a private school and admitted into a government school. The prospect of marrying three daughters is beyond the family. The son was looking shell-shocked throughout and crying in between, listening to every bit of our conversation. Every person walking in would say, “now he is your only hope”. As we were about to leave, the 11-year-old boy said, “I will look after my mother and sisters”.

The despair of sisters grieving over the death of a brother is often tinged with despair and anxiety for their own future too. The death of a 25-year-old in June 2008 was the result of spiralling debts. Two sisters, Balwinder Kaur and Kuljit Kaur, aged 18 and 19 years, in Mansa district, have studied up to class X. They are Ma-jhabi Sikhs. The family survives on daily wages; loans were below Rs 50,000. There is nothing in sight now – not even marriage. Two sisters from Lehragaga block in Sangrur district were disturbed by the family's economic plight. She added, “how do we survive afterwards? Even marriage or education is possible only if you sell land, and we have no land. So what do you expect us to do? There's no solution at all. We barely get Rs 20,000 per year from crops. Our daily expense is from the sale of milk only.” She is the only source of inspiration for her mother and two brothers. She got very involved in the interview of her mother and was especially articulate when the men were not around, speaking often on behalf of the entire family. She said at the end, “Looking at our house no one believes how poor we are. We actually have nothing; we buy nothing new ever.”

Two sisters from Lehragaga block in Sangrur district were married to two brothers and both the men committed suicide, one in 2001 and the other in 2003. They are dalits. The elder sister is keen to get her children educated and find jobs but does not know how. She is willing to send her daughter out; this was the first opinion of its kind in all interviews held so far. She seems quite brave and spirited despite the daunting situation. She is more than keen to put an end to the dependence on land if something can work out for her children. But what options are there for these young girls even when the mothers are willing to go against tradition are hard to figure out.

Kuldeep Singh’s father committed suicide in 2000 in Mansa district. He is 24 today – probably 16 when his father consumed pesticide. He told us calmly how their debts run into over Rs 2.5 lakh. Despite having four acres of land they barely earn Rs 1 lakh a year after paying interest to the bank and private moneylenders. Yet he shared his concern for his sisters for whose marriages the loans were taken. While the second sister is being treated badly in marriage, he is worried about his youngest sister and says they need at least Rs 3 lakh more. With the enormous burden on his head, his concern for his sisters was unimaginable. And even as one was absorbing how the last eight years must have been for him and what lies ahead, he confided that his first cousin, whom we had just met, is clinically depressed. The cousin looked quite disoriented, in pain and misery. He lost his father in the year 2005. The loans are over Rs 3 lakh and the entire harvest from two acres of land is taken way by the artiya as interest payments. “He simply beats his head on the wall everyday”, said Kuldeep. Even if he wants to look for a factory job, he has no money to go to town. Both the cousins are offspring of the mid-1980s, perhaps born in the year of Operation Bluestar.14 It was the period signifying the beginning of the end where people were beginning to witness the wearing off of the effects of the Green Revolution that lasted well into the early 1990s.

The reality of quiet and obedient young children is peculiarly offset by the older boys and young men who have taken recourse to drugs and other addictions. Listlessly obedient as a child but immersed in intoxicants in early youth – this is characteristic of the transition from adolescence to youth. What psychographics are in the making in this transition can be well imagined for an entire generation of children entering adulthood. It is the male youth of Punjab today that are bearing the brunt of the agricultural crisis, victimised as they are in their masculinity, sons of fathers who could not fulfil their responsibilities as head of the household. The land becomes a noose around your neck that you cannot sell or get rid of even as it takes away your entire being. How do we survive afterwards? Even marriage or education is possible only if you sell land, and we have no land. So what do you expect us to do? There's no solution at all. We barely get Rs 20,000 per year from crops. Our daily expense is from the sale of milk only.” She is the only source of inspiration for her mother and two brothers. She got very involved in the interview of her mother and was especially articulate when the men were not around, speaking often on behalf of the entire family. She said at the end, “Looking at our house no one believes how poor we are. We actually have nothing; we buy nothing new ever.”

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Intoxicants like drugs and alcohol are far more widely consumed by the male youth than what meets the eye. One could plainly see depression, alienation and suicide written on these young faces. The picture of the contented and happy Punjabi farmer in calendar art as the propaganda of the Green Revolution was an illusory one. In fact, that very image was laying the seeds of the widespread agricultural crisis that unfolded 20 years later.

3.4 Costly Healthcare

Many women shared their agony of illnesses and surgeries that have pushed them into indebtedness, often after the death of their husbands and sometimes after being in steep debt already. Depression is evident in a large number of families with very few taking medical treatment for it. While ovarian cysts and hysterectomies are common, the other surgeries include kidney stones, appendix, and hernia. Cancer is prevalent too, especially in Bhatinda district that is not yet covered in this survey. Getting a surgery done in a government hospital is often accompanied by expenses incurred on travel and purchase of medicines, sometimes requiring loans. Needless to say, private healthcare is what they often have to resort to, given the deteriorating state of the public healthcare system across the country.

Often surgeries are recommended but not followed up due to lack of money or because of the money being prioritised for other social compulsions like marriage and gifts to grandchildren. Narender Kaur who lost her 23-year-old son in August 2005 in Sangrur district seemed very ill and weak. She has two kidney stones and also mentioned some problem in her uterus without elaborating on it. She had to go to Sangrur for the ultra-sound test, which cost around Rs 1,200. But that is only the diagnosis. She cannot even contemplate the surgery for which the doctor said one needs to spend Rs 15,000 more. She said, “bimari pata karne mein hi itna paisa kharch hua”. Living off a loan, she has spent the last penny on her daughter’s marriage and now the grandchild’s birth. She is unable to do anything to ease her growing pain and discomfort caused by her urinary and reproductive ailments. Given the low status accorded to women’s health as such, there is no one around her to persuade her to do something for her own health.

Baljit Singh from Sangrur district seemed quite broken; she looked terribly old for her age. She is always sad and tense. Her neighbours said her mind is not working. But she was very clear and lucid as she shared with us all the details and showed us the first information report (FIR) filed after her husband committed suicide. One of her (two) sons is severely mentally-challenged. She herself takes heavy medication for depression and some other ailments; her medical expenses work out to Rs 400 per month. She showed us all her medicines and prescriptions. Her second son, aged 16-17 years, who studies in a private school, is almost all the time tense and quiet after coming from school. She is spending a tremendous amount of money on medicines for her health – problems caused by acute anxiety and worry. She said, “The doctor tells me not to worry. The only time that happens is when I sleep because how can I worry then?” This is typical of the many families one met. The mental agony and stress of these women, caused by the impact of suicides and holding together the fragile threads of survival, are simply incalculable.

Eighteen-year-old Balwinder Kaur told us how her family got indebted – meeting the costs of hepatitis treatment for her mother, purchases on credit from shops, etc. Their debts are below Rs 50,000, but being landless wage workers, they see no way of how to repay the debts. The mother continues to suffer bad health.

Fifty-year-old Kulvinder Kaur from Mamdot block in Ferozepur district, whose son committed suicide in 2007, is in very bad health. Despite having 13 acres of land, her accumulated debt is Rs 6 lakh; she has taken loans for her surgeries too. In the last few years she has undergone 3-4 surgeries involving the urinary tract, the eyes, as well as removal of an appendix. While one was done in a government hospital, the other two were in private nursing homes. She had to take a loan of Rs 50,000 to meet the medical expenses. In extremely bad health herself, she has to look after her husband as well as her ailing father-in-law.

Constant financial worries, the harassment of agents and children’s education, etc used to torment Lakhbir Rani’s husband, resident in Ferozepur district. They have less than an acre and their accumulated debt is over Rs 3 lakh. Two years back, the family had to take a loan of Rs one lakh for treatment of her cancer of the uterus at a private hospital in Jallandhar. Surgeries and other costly medical treatments push such families into further indebtedness while bad health prevents them from taking on work.

Indebted families take loans to meet the expenses of treatment and hospitalisation of the elderly that they continue to repay after the aged pass away. Two families in Mansa continue to repay loans taken to meet the expenses of the cancer treatment of the mother-in-law. Kuljit Kaur from Ferozepur spoke of how her mother-in-law died recently and she paid Rs 13,000 as her share of funeral and other expenses along with the two brother-in-laws. Otherwise, she would not get the 2 kanals from the mother-in-law’s share. Her mother helped her meet these expenses by also making her brothers pay Rs 2,000 each. Such support from the maternal side is very rare because invariably they are either equally poor or indifferent or both.

The most bizarre manifestation of commercial healthcare is witnessed in Punjab as private clinics take advantage of the situation when dying farmers are rushed in emergency by desperate families. Pola Singh from Mansa district who committed suicide in the year 2000 was hospitalised in the city of Ludhiana for four days before he died. The family had to take fresh loans at that critical moment as the hospital expenses came to Rs 90,000. Private hospitals in Mansa town too are known to charge at least Rs 70,000 for suicide attempt cases. Charging tens of thousands of rupees for a mere stomach wash or a couple of days in the intensive care unit (ICU) takes a few more years for the families to step out of indebtedness, if ever. A sinister snake and ladder game where the ladders turn into snakes too!

3.5 Taking Decisions and Voicing Expectations

Most of the women are beginning to come to grips with the fact that they are expected to take decisions. In a social milieu that has always seen women subjected to other people’s decisions, the current scenario is both confusing and challenging. The expectations voiced by these women revolve largely around the future of the children in terms of school fees, technical training and employment. The most obvious ways in which they assert
themselves is in the upbringing of the children, undertaken with deep concern and hopes for the future. However, in matters pertaining to land, hiring labour, leasing out land on rent, fresh loans, etc, it is the husband’s brother or father who continues to take decisions even as the land has been transferred to the woman or her son. Visiting their mothers is in most cases a decision that others have to validate; in a couple of exceptional cases, the women decide on their own. Voting choices and organisational membership with the peasant unions bring them in touch with a larger collective where it exists. This part of the present study will be further explored. It is the only way in which we can think in terms of concrete measures and strategies if we wish to address the specificities of the situation in Punjab.

4 Some Concerns, Some Issues

While the myth of the family as a refuge for women is getting shaken through many radical critiques of patriarchy, compulsory heterosexuality continues to hold in its grip millions of women in this country who have no choice but to enter marriage as the most normative act. However, the relative benefits that patriarchy accords to women goes for a toss in the context of farmers’ suicides. Did these women exercise any choice? What options do they have today? The burden of patriarchy on working class men and the peasantry is clearly evident, where every suicide marks an inability to look into the future after an intense and agonising confrontation with one’s own capacities in the present. Yet the deafening silence surrounding the struggles of the poor to “run” families or “maintain” families emanates to a significant extent from an insufficient engagement with issues concerning class, caste and patriarchy, and the weakening of strategies of resistance.

The nexus of the structured oppressions of class, caste and patriarchy is layered and affects women in multiple ways. The challenges thrown up by identity politics is best realised when we are able to look at the paradigm in its entirety to renew our assumptions and deeply-held beliefs. It is most counterproductive when we make a laundry list of identities or make a fetish of the assumptions and deeply-held beliefs. It is most counterproductive if we wish to “maintain” families emanates to a significant extent from an insufficient engagement with issues concerning class, caste and patriarchy, and the weakening of strategies of resistance.

The current reality is a grave indicator of the measures that need to be taken by the state and the financial institutions. It also needs intervention from the peasant movement, the women’s movement, youth organisations, and other democratic forces. Recognising how our struggles are being undermined by the growing presence of divisive conservative forces and anti-people economic policies will help us envision new strategies of resistance and new alliances across oppressed groups. To address the complexity of these issues and their interrelatedness necessitates a holistic perspective of various oppressive structures, practices and institutions from which will emerge newer forms of resistance.

NOTES

1 Over 16,632 farmer suicides have taken place in 2007 itself and the total in the country since 1997 is now 1,82,936, according to P Sainath (The Hindu, 12 December 2008).


4 Ranjit Singh Ghuman reveals, on the basis of empirical evidence, the wide variations that exist with regard to the proportion of rural non-farm workers between census data and ground realities. See his “Rural Non-Farm Employment Scenario”, EPW, 8 October 2005, pp 4473-80.


6 Ibid.

7 The Punjab Agricultural University has initiated a large-scale survey covering all villages in the state in order to arrive at a clear numerical estimate of the number of farmer suicides there.

8 Jat Sikhs as a community in Punjab are, in political and economic terms, the most dominant. The community is imbued with a deep pride and a conservative outlook.

9 Rai Sikhs trace their lineage to a Rajput clan. They are popularly known as the “tigers of the borders”. There is another version of their joining the Sikh faith after being prosecuted for not giving their daughters in marriage to Aurangzeb.

10 Names of all women and others interviewed have been changed.

11 Majhabi Sikhs are supposed to be descendents of the Chuhra caste who embraced Sikhism. Guru Gobind Singh apparently brought them into the faith in appreciation of their having carried the mutilated body of Guru Teg Bahadur from Delhi.

12 Ramdasia Sikhs seem to be a sub-caste of Julahas (weaver). They had suffered immensely with the decline of traditional weaving and eventually took on farming as a profession.

13 Kanal is a local unit of measuring land. Eight kanals make one acre.

14 Operation Bluestar refers to the military operations of the Indian Army in June 1984, ordered by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to remove Sikh militant and weapons amassed in the Golden Temple at Amritsar. Hundreds were killed; a sequence of events followed that led ultimately to her assassination in New Delhi on 31 October, 1984 by her Sikh bodyguards.