



Those Who Did Not Die

Impact of the Agrarian Crisis on Women in Punjab

Ranjana
Padhi



书馆

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Foreword

Sometime in the early 2000s, the People's Union For Democratic Rights held a discussion on farmer suicides as part of the Ramanadham Memorial event held in September each year to keep up the democratic rights work of Dr Ramanadham, killed by the police in 1983 in Warangal, in Andhra Pradesh. The speakers included the well known economist Dr Gill from Punjab and the democratic rights activist Balagopal who forcefully presented a report on farmer's suicides in Andhra Pradesh based on a fact finding conducted by democratic rights activists there. As we listened to the poignant account of the suicides, located in the crisis of the economy generated by the agrarian policies of the state, it became obvious to us that the general crisis in agriculture and the debt trap that sucked farmers into its vicious grip, was aggravated by the new privatised medical care as part of the globalisation/privatisation policies initiated by the state where treating even small and routinized illnesses such as dehydration could end up with a bill of thousands of rupees leading to despair because of the inability to borrow any further in a market where a man had 'lost face' because his loans were unpaid. The loss of self esteem was often the trigger for the suicide. Tragically, the failure of the state to provide healthcare, a fundamental right of citizens, had been turned into a private failure on the part of a man represented—and experienced as such too—as someone who was unable to provide for his family in a time of need. Adding to the debt trap was the private economy of dowry, not directly attributed to the state in any way but certainly promoted by the market, and terrifyingly held up in a vicious grip by a community based patriarchy that made marriage contingent upon economic transactions, which too fell upon the father of a girl to provide, subjecting him to a terrible sense of failure if he could not adequately do so. I remember saying at that meeting that while the democratic rights groups would take up the issues of the agricultural crisis and the lack of healthcare, both of which they would be able to pin on the state, what would we do about dowry? Was that to be left to the feminists to deal with? Were

the women's groups alone to struggle against dowry? It appeared to me that a new sexual division of labour was operating in the world of struggles: were left and democratic groups only going to take on the struggles against the state and leave patriarchy and social reform to the feminists I asked. I got no answer to these questions then but Ranjana, who was at that meeting too, has found us all a way to think about the painful contradictions of our times by writing this book. She has done that by marvellously bringing together the 'personal domain' and the 'political domain', showing us that the personal is *always* the political and it is we who conveniently forget that early slogan of the women's movement because we continue to create a hierarchy of analysis, and consequently a hierarchy of political action. After reading Ranjana's work I hope that we will no longer do that: the two modes of analyses are so completely intertwined that there should only be one way of thinking about, and struggling against, the agricultural crisis that has swept across large parts of India which is playing havoc in the lives of women, men and children in rural India. It is a havoc that is compounded by a high incidence of cancer, attributable by some health analysts to a high use of chemical pesticides as part of the Green Revolution mode of agricultural development: many are dying of cancer and families trying to provide for the expensive private healthcare often find their men folk using the same pesticides to kill themselves, unable to bear the burdens of further debts they are required to enter into. An uncaring state takes no responsibility for the consequences it has generated through its development policies.

In this work Ranjana shows how by bringing class analysis and gender analysis together within a single framework leads us to understand how burdensome patriarchy is for men even as it is so oppressive for women: notions of masculinity are a prison-house for men who begin to feel a sense of desperation about their 'failure' to support the family—in other words uphold their responsibility to provide for the family, especially the women who are regarded as 'dependent' on them for the ritual obligation of a father's duty to perform the marriage of his daughter with its inevitable concomitant of a 'suitable' dowry upon which the social prestige of the family rests. Here, in a sensitive analysis, while patriarchy is constantly critiqued by Ranjana, she understands that its obligations upon men drives them to despair when they must uphold them even in times of dire financial crisis, created by a heartless political and economic

system. Their sense of *izzat* is contingent upon raising money for a dowry—it must be literally ‘bought’ from society by the payment of a groom price to the family to which the groom belongs. It is a symbol of the upward social mobility aspirations of a family, otherwise trapped in an economy of debt, even as it only brings that status momentarily. Ranjana draws special attention to the terrible burdens carried by single sons as they raise loans for the marriages of their sisters, watched over by mothers who can do nothing to intervene and stop the cycle of suicides in the family. This grounds our understanding of a fragile masculinity in a material reality, something we have not seen in other studies of masculinity which are otherwise proliferating today.

There are two central issues that Ranjana brings into this work on farmer suicides and the agrarian crisis which has suddenly and dramatically rewritten the euphoria of the ‘green revolution’ and its false promise of being able to sustain a capitalist economy that rests on credit which can easily be paid back with the boom expected at the end of the harvest. In fact these two issues have been ignored by economists: one the actual work women do within a farming economy; and two the cycle of economic transactions that hold up the ideology and material basis of marriage. Marriage itself, though insecurely poised in the fragile economy, and certainly unable to bear its original social contract of men ‘maintaining’ women, a highly insecure proposition in actuality, is tragically still the only destiny for women. Inevitably therefore, dowry is a central issue in Ranjana’s examination of the crisis in Punjab; while many have drawn attention to the boom period of the Green Revolution and the collapse of the agrarian economy after the boom few economists are engaging with today’s economic reality highlighted by the farmer’s suicides. Even fewer are looking at what happens to a family when the ‘man’ of the family kills himself, what happens to women and children who are left to cope with life and the debts that get left behind and relentlessly claim their due. Ranjana shows us how women cope, even as they experience a sense of helplessness. Already overworked through the labour they render within a patriarchal household which invisibilizes their labour as non-existent, the actual obligations of ‘house work’ that includes looking after cattle (apart from their work in the fields) cooking, cleaning, and care of children, the sick and the elderly they now must support the emotional stress of children and in-laws who have lost their primary provider, and also manage the pay back of

the debts that killed the 'farmer' in the first place. Then, they must take decisions to sell lands, marry off their daughters, become tenants first and then wage labourers in order to survive, borrow once more to keep the food, educational and health requirements of the household going. But as Ranjana tells us poignant stories of surviving the crisis, there are even more poignant stories in this work: of a 13 year old boy who kills himself because his family can no longer afford to send him to school, or a daughter who is married off without dowry after her father becomes one more name in the list of farmers who commit suicide; a year after her marriage, unable to bear the humiliation at her in laws place she too killed herself leaving the mother with a dead husband and a dead daughter. Some men kill themselves even before a daughter's marriage unable to raise a dowry. We may recall that according to some anthropologists dowry is a form of pre-mortem payment to the daughter at her marriage that will cancel out her claim to a share of the property in the future. It is ironical therefore that this so called pre-mortem 'gift' leaves a residue in the natal family in the form of a debt cycle that can literally turn into a death trap for the family. And yet, a younger generation of women and men adhering to custom might even use emotional blackmail against mothers and other family members continuing to claim dowry and thus perpetuating the cycle of debt. Emotion is at the heart of material relations, a complex truth we need to acknowledge.

Ever sensitive to the isolation and agony of women who must somehow find the strength to go on, Ranjana's analysis manages to capture the subjective experiences of women and thereby refuses to turn the suicides into mere statistics erasing the realities of lived experience. So, among the many strengths of the book is its powerful documenting of women's lives, its incredible archival value for history, even as its own stated focus is to find a way to struggle against the agrarian crisis in the Punjab, where too many have killed themselves and others desperately try and resist death. As 'those who did not die' these women and men and children enter history through Ranjana's archiving of their pain and their courage. Punjab holds up a mirror to our conscience and the choices our political class has made in 'the land of the five rivers' compounding the irony of our times.

Uma Chakravarti
Feminist Historian, New Delhi

To the Fellow Travellers

It is through the lived experiences of the women who participated in the interviews that the book attempts to draw political and humanitarian attention to the aftermath of peasant suicides in Punjab. Their sharing of information, thoughts and feelings is the most significant source of this work. I remain indebted to the women who allowed a glimpse of the past and its pain to the stranger in me.

The entire field visits have been made possible with the active support extended by three peasant organizations namely, Bharatiya Kisan Union-Ekta (Ugrahan) that helped me cover a vast section of the Malwa region, Punjab Kisan Union that helped me design the formal questionnaire and begin the work in Mansa district, and Bharatiya Kisan Union-Ekta (Dakaunda) that helped me with the initial encouragement and identifying contacts. The openness and support of these unions helped me begin a journey that seemed so tough in its conception stage. My special thanks are to Sukhdev Singh Kokri (Moga); Jasbir Kaur Nat and Sudharshan Nat (Mansa); Kulwant Singh (Kishangarh) in Mansa district; and Jagmohan and Darshan Pal in Patiala for the intense discussions and providing answers to my many queries with much patience.

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Barnala district; Kashmir Singh in Patiala district; and Beant Kaur (Tamkot) in Mansa district.

The traditional Punjabi hospitality and the warmth I received while staying in the houses of comrades will remain with me forever. I also thank the many women and children in these families, whose initial mild curiosity in my work, invariably leading to long conversations, widened the overall canvas in a significant manner.

I thank Karen Haydock for the cover design; her many other illustrations were in my mind even as I began work in the Punjab. My most trying moments were with the presentation of the quantitative data. I thank Paramjeet Singh (Timmy) for helping present the data in tabular format. I thank Bina Laishram and Yusuf Mohammed for the support provided in data processing.

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Autonomous collectives, coalitions and movements that gave me space over the years to develop my political understanding are quite a few. Of these I cherish my years in Saheli the most.

My parents, simple and compassionate with unquestionable integrity, continue to inspire me. And, I wish more daughters to get the same freedom as I did to continue unfettered in the search of a new society—of our own making.

Introduction

Why I Wrote This Book

We are learning to live in the midst of many harsh realities, each unique in its own way, of untold human suffering and indignity. Perhaps the most bizarre is how this country's food producers are seeking pesticides or the noose to end their own lives. They are the producers of the food we daily consume. Agriculture continues to be our most basic source of sustenance even if buying what we require from the closest shop in a hectic metropolis is the closest some of us come to agriculture. Our alienation from wheat and paddy fields and the invisibility of the hard-working peasantry are both finally ending, however, as watching TV news over a plate of food is no longer easy in today's times. News headlines flash suicides from the Vidharbha region of Maharashtra, and from many other states, from Kerala to Punjab. One need not be an economist or a sociologist to understand the contemporary crisis in agriculture; one just has to be human, as nothing connects us more to life than food. Whose toil has gone into the rice and rotis we eat—is the farmer who grew these cereals still alive? And if the person who grew this food is fighting a tough battle between life and death, there is something seriously amiss.

To know more about this formidable reality, I had to take a few steps closer to the murky side of agriculture. The single question that haunted me to the point of distraction was the aftermath of a suicide: how were women coping with the tragic circumstances and, more importantly, meeting their own needs and those of their families? There's no dearth of literature on the agrarian crisis in general and peasant suicides in particular. However, there's no way we get to know about how women—who are an active part of the peasantry—experience the crisis. This study is an attempt to break a culture of silence by engaging in dialogue with the person concerned about the surrounding reality as seen and experienced by her in the aftermath of a suicide. There is a vexed ambiguity at work throughout. Whether

one is trying to make women more visible and to bring their voices into the public arena so as to make the picture of the devastating agrarian crisis more complete, or whether—more significantly—one is able to glimpse a way forward for women in the midst of the systemic injustice and deepening crisis in this predominantly poor and rural country. These questions, findings and observations that the book brings will, hopefully, add to the body of literature and research on the agrarian crisis as well as on peasant struggles in the Punjab and elsewhere.

The spate of suicides by small and marginal farmers in several states of India reflects the crisis in Indian agriculture, unprecedented in post independence India. The quarter million¹ suicides recorded so far call serious attention to the reality of lakhs more of the peasantry, especially agricultural labourers, on the brink of devastation in this country. The suicides of agricultural labourers continue to go unreported in almost all studies or news reports on peasant suicides. In Punjab, for instance, of a total of 2890 suicides in the two districts of Bhatinda and Sangrur, 61% were farmers and 39% were agricultural labourers.² This phenomenon is largely seen as an outcome of policy failures related to agriculture, particularly in the post liberalization period. However, studies on Punjab, for example, suggest the need to understand the wider context of social changes taking place in rural Punjab in the past four decades. Studies on peasant suicides and indebtedness continue to render invisible the family and the household, with the agricultural labourer or farmer viewed solely as a producer of food selling his or her labour or produce. Yet a peasant—male or female—does not enter debt for the sake of agricultural inputs alone. Those dependent on agriculture depend on it to fulfil several needs even as they produce food for society at large—food for their own families, education or jobs for their children, marriage expenses, health care, along with dreams of a more dignified life for their near and dear ones. The working class and the peasantry hold on to their dreams with tenacity, even when these dreams seem to remain unfulfilled. The stakes in the sweeping economic changes are becoming heavy; therefore, the need to remain close to their aspirations more urgent, even if arduous—for in the interim the rising cost of agricultural inputs, volatile market prices, increasing debt, unforeseen weather conditions, failed crops, spurious seeds and a range of other factors take their toll.

Inputs into agriculture far outweigh the income generated from agriculture. Being perceived as the head of the patriarchal family—as a father, son or brother—the male farmer is under tremendous pressure to make ends meet and fulfil all other responsibilities. When he is unable to perform the role of provider or *karamdata*, unable to look after everyone's needs, a sense of futility keeps building up inside, which his already injured masculine pride prevents him from expressing or sharing with family members. The reasons for suicide become blurred as several factors overlap, and any one event can be a trigger point—low self-esteem, hurt pride, humiliation by recovery agents and *arhtiyas* all contribute. There is the torment of seeing one's children not having enough to eat, or facing one's inability to pay their school fees. The failure of crops or little or no payment from sale of crops as pending loans are cancelled against it often become the final straw. The land may have to be sold for payment of debts. Such a decision implies ignominy and defeat as family land in this country is so tied up to the identity of one's family and ancestors. Women are, more often than not, shielded from these events. Often, it is only in the aftermath of a suicide that the father-in-law or a panchayat member or the *arhtiya* himself reveals the debts to the wife.

These gendered spaces—between the public and the private—are costly and tragic. It is this false dichotomy between the social and economic or family and work that continues to inform perceptions, attitudes, policies, development programs and hence resource allocations. The ideological underpinnings of this dichotomy make things far too severe for women, especially those surviving the impact of suicides. From the microcosm of a specific suicide case to a larger view of society, the silences emanating from our structured realities are most damaging. The invisibility of women's labour and the negation of contribution in sustaining the livelihoods of the household are as serious in the long-lived consequences as the distressed male farmer's silence regarding the life-and-death turmoil he is undergoing. As these farmers die, do they damn the entire system that compels their exit? Their cries and longing for life simply signal attention to the plight of millions more of the peasantry that are surviving against all odds today in our society. Is resorting to suicide then an act of resistance in the face of increased exploitation of the peasantry? Or defeat at the hands of a murderous society and its institutions and cultural practices?

Primarily, the intent of this book is to draw political and humanitarian attention to the aftermath of peasant suicides, particularly the coping strategies of women who are already marginalized in a deeply traditional and patriarchal society. As an urgent political task, I attempt to make the picture that meets the eye more complete. Women's voices, and some broad data from the overall analysis, will speak to readers of the crisis from my precise point of entry into this region and the endless saga of its toiling class. *Secondly*, the dead end that widowhood signifies in this feudal-patriarchal society needs to be interrogated—especially, in this context, through the instances of widows running fatherless families. The growing number of “widows” in the Punjab is determined by processes that demand our attention—be it the political economy or cultural practices. What do these women have to say about their changed circumstances? Can we shift the lens to view the woman as survivor, even as she holds on to the fragile threads of existence despite colossal losses? More fervently than ever she holds on to her dreams of a future for herself and her children. What colour or hue will this future be, what shape? *Finally*, the impetus to begin documenting lives in this agrarian milieu came from a deep need to understand the deep distress and the fragmentation of the individual self in poverty experienced by the peasant community, especially after having toiled hard to make Punjab the bread basket of the country. The subjective reality of dispossession and the related psychological stress for entire communities need to be documented to reveal the extent of destruction capitalism brings in its pursuit.

Perhaps the shocking figure of 77% Indians living on less than ₹ 20 per day makes for a truth not easy to bear.³ Perhaps empathy is a less difficult response than defeat for those of us who seek to build a different society. Perhaps persistent questioning has certain tenacity, and it was this that helped in finally taking me closer to a reality that is only a few hours away from the national capital in a geographical and spatial sense.

Why Look into the Punjab

Living in Delhi, it was the proximity to Punjab that helped me decide that I did not have to go to the Vidharbha region when suicides were

happening just six hours away. Many assumptions about the cradle of the Green Revolution along with its image of prosperity were being overturned or questioned in recent years. A close interaction with the state-created widows of Punjab in the aftermath of the anti-Sikh genocide of 1984—during which over 3,000 Sikhs were estimated to have been killed and thousands more rendered homeless with the complicity of the Indian state—had been a turning point in our student years in Delhi. Barely had we been able to absorb the enormity of the nationalist question in Punjab and the violence that carried on till the early 90s when, in an international seminar held in Delhi 1996, there was a presentation linking Punjab's agrarian crisis to the question of Sikh nationhood and the fight for a separate Khalistan that was deeply critical of both.⁴ Looking back, it was possible to trace the widespread unrest among the peasantry, youth, teachers' unions, in the years preceding Operation Bluestar. The deep rift between centre-state relations, and the emergence of the Akali Dal and its boosting of religious identity, had affected the work of many left democratic sections among the youth and peasantry. The model of the Green Revolution⁵ obviously had not escaped the tentacles of the acute agrarian crisis that was spreading across the country; at this crucial point, state repression also grew in an unimaginable manner. The discontent simmering among the peasantry, especially agricultural labourers, spilled out in large contingents as kisan rallies reached Delhi's Boat Club area. Turban-clad farmers from the Punjab stood out in the *melée*, making one wonder. It was evident that the grinning Jat Sikh farmer symbolizing agricultural prosperity on calendar art was in revolt. The boast of a prosperous Punjab with its highest-in-the country per capita income was clearly just part of the Green Revolution propaganda.

Perhaps the exposure to working class families during the intense phase of factory closures and forced evictions in the national capital from 1996 onwards, and to the way in which women coped in the aftermath, had already become the beginning of a search. My feminist convictions were taking me closer to understanding both the coping strategies of women in the face of changed realities as well as the impact of the policies of the neoliberal regime that was, and is, precipitating the dispossession of vast sections of the populace. With closer exposure to anti-displacement and anti-mining struggles in Orissa and elsewhere, one's sheer inability to look more closely

at the situation of women in these regions became more frustrating. I have to confess that with jobs, livelihoods, natural resources, dwelling places and identity all at stake, it was often almost impossible to look at how women were differently impacted, despite all of one's feminist training and rigour. Caught between activism and reading, the search for critical reflection had begun a clamour within that was hard to quieten. This reality could never be easily bridged with the intellectual climate in which one had to contend with the postmodernist assertions that were ceaselessly deconstructing all identities in writings, seminars and conferences. Passively, then, we were living through a general bewilderment as many actually queried who the ordinary woman was—*aam aurat hai kaun?*

Many trees have since been felled in the cause of arguing that there is no such thing as “ordinary” and no generic “woman”. Many women of privilege have passionately critiqued such generalizations by subjecting the “ordinary woman” to many extraordinary critiques. And yet, my sense that we were losing feminist ground in the context of current realities filled me with a persistent, nagging confusion. An occasional article by feminist writers on assessing the relevance of socialist feminism in today's context gave rise to some insights and further questions. Finally, in the midst of a public meeting on peasant suicides held by PUDR in 2004,⁶ something got resolved. I decided to go to Punjab and meet women who were surviving the impact of peasant suicides. I felt certain that by doing so I would at least be able to give a name or a face to the confusion that had come to live with me every waking hour. Going to Punjab to meet women in families that had seen peasant suicides was one way of directly acquainting myself with the efforts of women in dealing with the calamities wreaked by intensifying economic distress. There was no other way, no shortcut to understanding—from women's point of view, specifically—the outcome of agricultural policies and their toll on the peasantry.

The debate characterizing the Indian economy has its own variations and specificities among peasant organizations in Punjab. Even as it grapples with the current agrarian crisis, the debate, with its rich and long history, is determining joint alliances and strategies today as it has in the past. Discussions on women's participation in agricultural labour and household labour in an agrarian society continue, however, to remain neglected. Entering this neglected area to look at women's situation with the active support of different