

Farmer Suicides in India

Mains: GS III – Agriculture

Why in News?

Recently, the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) released a data on farmer's suicide in a new analysis of last 28 years.

What does the data reveal?

- **2 important states** – Maharashtra and Karnataka have remained the epicentres of farmer suicides in India for more than two decades.
- The suicide rates consistently about 2.5 times the national average since the mid-1990s,
 - **Maharashtra** – 4,151 farmer suicides
 - **Karnataka** – 2,423, farmer suicides
- In 2023 alone, these states recorded, these numbers making them the two worst-affected states in the country.
- **Major reason** – One of the major drivers over the years has been the rapid spread of Bt cotton in the early 2000s, particularly across rain-fed regions, the analysis by independent research organization Centre for Sustainable Agriculture (CSA) found.
- The study links the crisis in these states to the failure of Bt cotton to deliver on promises of higher yields and pest resistance.
- Instead, farmers faced sharply rising input costs and greater financial risk.
- Repeated crop failures, combined with the absence of reliable price support, pushed many small and marginal farmers into chronic debt.
- **Regional concentration of crisis** – Beyond Maharashtra and Karnataka, the data show a clear regional concentration of the crisis.
- Southern and western India together account for around 72.5% of all farmer suicides recorded since 1995.
- Andhra Pradesh and Telangana follow closely among the worst-affected states.
- Together, they have reported more than 170,000 farmer suicides over the past 28 years.
- Telangana, which was carved out of Andhra Pradesh in 2014, has emerged as a high-crisis state in its own right.
- The cotton-growing districts that became part of Telangana already carried a heavy suicide burden, while coastal Andhra Pradesh districts historically reported lower rates.
- Madhya Pradesh has also consistently ranked among the top contributors to national suicide figures, underlining that the crisis is not confined to a single region.

What are the Peak years of agrarian crisis?

- **The period of crisis** – At least 394,206 farmers and agricultural labourers died by suicide in India, according to NCRB records.
- This amounts to an average of about 13,600 deaths every year.
- The analysis noted that the crisis intensified after India joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995.
- Reduced subsidies and increased agricultural imports weakened farm incomes, particularly for small producers.
- **2000 to 2009** – The most acute phase came between 2000 and 2009, when more than 154,000 suicides were recorded.
- **2002** – The year 2002 stands out as the deadliest, with 17,971 farmer suicides nationwide.
- **2023** – After years of decline, the trend reversed sharply in 2023.
- The country recorded 10,786 farmer suicides, an increase of more than 75% compared with 2022.
- The figures also reveal a significant shift within the rural economy.
- Agricultural labourers now account for a larger share of suicides than cultivators.
- Of the 10,786 deaths recorded in 2023, 6,096 were agricultural labourers, compared with 4,690 cultivators.
- **Identified causes** – Researchers linked this to a combination of droughts, collapsing crop prices, weak crop insurance, and shrinking access to institutional credit.
- The growing share of suicides among agricultural labourers points to deeper rural distress.
- **Effect on labourers** – Unlike land-owning farmers, labourers face:
 - Acute wage insecurity,
 - Seasonal unemployment,
 - Rising food prices and
 - Limited social protection,
- Making them especially vulnerable to economic shocks.
- The analysis cautioned, however, that part of the increase in 2023 may reflect delayed reporting during the Covid-19 period, rather than a sudden deterioration in a single year.

How MGNREGA came to rescue?

- **Declining of farmers' suicide** – The sharp rise in 2023 contrasts with trends seen over much of the previous decade.
- From around 2010 onwards, farmer suicides declined steadily across several states, reaching their lowest levels between 2015 and 2019.
- **Key Intervention** – One of the key interventions during this period was the *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)*, which provided wage employment during lean agricultural seasons and drought years.
- MGNREGA helped reduce income volatility for small and marginal farmers and agricultural labourers.
- **Other measure** – Expanded crop insurance coverage and debt relief measures.
- **Visible results** – *Kerala* recorded a steep fall in farmer suicides, from 1,118 in 2005 to

105 in 2014.

- *West Bengal* reported zero farmer suicides by 2012, according to the NCRB data analysed.
- *Madhya Pradesh*, which had recorded some of the highest numbers during the peak crisis years, also saw sustained reductions during this period.
- **Shortcomings** – In states such as Maharashtra and Karnataka, suicide numbers have remained persistently high despite welfare interventions, underscoring the limits of short-term relief in the absence of broader agrarian reform.
- In these states rain-fed agriculture and market-linked commercial crops continue to dominate.

Reference

[Down To Earth| Farmer's Suicide](#)

