

Understanding Punjab Farmer Suicides: A Qualitative Study

A capstone project presented in partial fulfillment  
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## Abstract

The farmer suicide phenomenon in Punjab, India, has been ongoing since the 1980's, which is around the same time Punjab was dealing with the side effects of the green revolution technology implemented by the central government in the 1960s. The products of the Green Revolution include diseased soil, pest-infested crops- waterlogged deserts, and indebted farmers; these effects have put financial hardships on farmers throughout Punjab. Over the years, instead of addressing farmer disparity through policies and programs, the central government decided to implement three farm bills known as the "2020 farm bills," which combined open up farmers to a new threat: exploitation from big corporations. This cross-sectional study attempts to investigate the farmer suicide phenomenon in Punjab through qualitative interviews. There is a lack of recent research on this topic, and the research that does exist is primarily quantitative methods. To fill this gap, the participants of this study are related to recent farmer suicides. Eight participants who are connected to someone who has either died or attempted farmer suicide were interviewed centered around the question "what role has the central government played in farmer suicide." The interviews revealed five themes: Patriarchy, The Value of Land, Financial Hardship, Government Failure, and 2020 farm bills. These five themes help explain what factors go into farmers feeling a sense of distress. This study comes promptly, considering the debate and protest surrounding the implementation of the 2020 farm bills. This study provides quotations from those who have suffered from India's history of government policy failures and provides insight into what issues need to be addressed by policymakers.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Half of India's 1.3 billion population depends on agriculture as a livelihood source; agriculture in India employs 60 percent of the population and accounts for 18% of its GDP (Statista, 2021). Nevertheless, farmers are at a higher risk of dying by suicide than the general public. Between 1997-2006, official records indicate that 166,304 farmers died by suicide in India, which accounts for 15.2 percent of all suicides. More recently, the National Crime Records Bureau reports that more than 10,000 farmers died by suicides in 2019 (Tripathi, 2020). However, due to lack of reporting resulting from the stigma around suicide in India, this number is believed to underestimate farmer suicides (Nagaraj, 2008).

Farmer suicides became a phenomenon in India in the 1980's due to the impact of the Green Revolution. The Green Revolution was first tested in Punjab, a northern state in India sharing a border with Pakistan. The Green Revolution attempted to modernize farming with the introduction of high-yielding variety seeds. To incentivize farmers to switch from indigenous farming methods to exogenous methods, the central government offered farmers subsidies. The initial short-term results of the seeds successfully increased Punjab's agricultural productivity, which coined Punjab with the infamous title as the breadbasket of India. Two decades after introducing this technology, the state of Punjab's agriculture became violently consumed by the very technology that was supposed to bring it everlasting peace. Punjab found itself with diseased soils, pest-infested crops, waterlogged deserts, and indebted farmers. The effects of the Green Revolution have left Punjab in a never-ending cycle of debt, conflict and violence (Shiva, 1991).

The Green Revolution's long-term effects have created an environment in which financial hardships are frequent in Punjab. Because of the Green Revolution, farmers are forced to borrow

money from banks and government-assigned mediators to purchase seeds, equipment, and other essentials. Furthermore, lousy harvest quarters due to weather can destroy fields of crops leading to financial hardship (Singh, 2019). A survey conducted by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development in 2016 reported that in the three years leading up to the survey, the average amount of debt that farmers were liable for had more than doubled (Menon, 2021). Financial hardship is an individual's inability to meet basic living expenses for goods and services necessary for survival for themselves and their dependents (Cornell Law). The literature studied in the project displays further evidence that indebtedness is considered a leading factor in the financial hardships that lead to farmer suicides throughout India (Merriott, 2016; Sadanandan, 2014; Gill, 2004. Bhalla et al.,2001; Iyer & Manick, 2002). Economists have determined that suicide is not an act that comes solely from social isolation or mental illness. It can also arise from financial and economic distress (Marcotte, 2003).

This cross-sectional study utilizing interview methods attempts to uncover and understand the farmer suicide phenomenon in Punjab. There is a significant amount of research that concentrates on the relationship between financial hardships and farmer suicides. However, most of the research is primarily quantitative, and focuses on farmer suicides occurring before the year 2006. This study aims to build upon prior research by conducting qualitative interviews centered around the questions “what role has the central government played in farmer suicides”. A total of eight people were interviewed who have connections to farmers who have either died or attempted suicide in Punjab. The stories collected in the interviews take place over the span of the last eight years, from 2013 to 2021. This study will attempt to understand what issues are putting farmers at risk in the current day.

## Chapter 2: Background

Literature indicates that the financial hardships of Punjab's farmers can be traced to the implementation of the Green Revolution in India. Understanding the effects of the green revolution is critical in understanding what brought on the farmer suicide epidemic. A book titled "The Violence of the Green Revolution" illustrates the history and effects of the Green Revolution in India. The Green Revolution was designed to create an abundance in agriculture by defying nature's limits. Norman Borlaug, the creator of the techno-political strategy for peace, was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 for his role in the Green Revolution. However, two decades after introducing the Green Revolution, Punjab found itself with diseased soils, pest-infested crops, waterlogged deserts, and indebted and discontented farmers. As a result of her ground-level research, the author concludes that the Green Revolution has left Punjab in a never-ending cycle of conflict and violence (Shiva, 1991).

In the late 1940's India suffered an agricultural setback due to the worldwide recession and depression that resulted from World War II and India's Independence in 1947. This setback presented two responses to the food crises that emerged through the war years, an Indigenous and an exogenous response. The Indigenous model centered around internal organic outputs. For 10,000 years, before the Green Revolution, farmers were self-reliant. They had "produced their own seeds, on their own land, selecting the best seeds, restoring them, replanting them and letting nature take its course in the renewable and enrichment of life." (Shiva, 1991 pg 63). In contrast, the exogenous model shifted the self-reliance of the farmers to reliance on scientists of multinational seed companies and international research institutions.

In 1951 the agricultural ministry held a seminar that presented a worked-out model of Indian agriculture's regeneration. This indigenous agricultural policy model aimed to partner

with nature's process by recognizing that the diversity of Indian soils, crops, and climate needs to be accounted for to reform agriculture. The model aimed to plan from the bottom, keeping the interests of individual villages and fields at the heart of a "land transformation" program. At the same time, American scientists were gaining momentum by introducing an exogenous model, which " was based not on cooperation with nature, but on its conquest" (Shiva, 1991 pg 29).

The implementation of the green revolution began amid a drought in 1966, which caused a severe drop in food production in India. At the time, there was also an unprecedented increase in food grain supply for the US. Due to India's lack of production and the US's surplus of it, India built a food dependency on the US. However, President Lyndon Johnson refused to provide food aid further than one month in advance until the agreement to adopt the green revolution package was signed between the Indian Agricultural Minister and the US security of agriculture. By the mid-1960s, India's agricultural policies had become well-adjusted to utilize and promote the new seeds. The seeds of the green revolution are referred to as High Yielding Variety (HYV) seeds, which are biologically engineered seeds that have been selected and developed to give high productivity by using more chemical fertilizers and pesticides (Thomas & Muga, 2014). The HYV seeds that dominated Punjab are wheat, rice, and maize. By 1968, nearly half of the wheat planted came from the High Yielding Variety seeds. Punjab had become reliant on three seeds, which replaced indigenous crops, destroying the diversity of the Punjabs Crops leading to an irreversible loss of biodiversity.

The state of Punjab witnessed a boom in the agricultural sector during the 1970s as farmers' net returns increased due to a paramount increase in the productivity of principal crops. However, the 1980s witnessed a phase of stagnation in the crop yield and net returns from farming (Singh, 2000). Profits decreased due to previously unseen input costs such as chemical

fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, and dams for intensive irrigation, which were required for farmers to maximize crop yield. Additionally, HYV seeds consume three or four times more chemical fertilizers to produce high quantities of grains. The indigenous method put a low demand on the land and maintained the equilibrium of the soil. Indigenous farmers use crop rotation and leveling fields to retain the nutrients in the soil. The switch into the HYV seeds led to an overuse of chemical fertilizers, which caused a physical and chemical degradation of the soil in Punjab. The overuse of chemical fertilizers also required a substantial increase in water usage, which led to a "total destabilization of water balance in the region" (Shiva, 1991 pg 128).

The Green Revolution was the central government's first official attempt at unjustly modernizing the agricultural industry and the 2020 farm bills are the latest.

## The Current State of Punjab Farming

In September 2020, three bills were signed into law by the Central Government, which have motivated farmers from all around India to protest for the last six months on the streets of Delhi, the nation's capital. In a democratic country, these three bills, which dramatically shift the farming structure all around India, were created and implemented without the input of farmers' unions. Protests including 250 million supporters in India and internationally have been taking place since the Indian parliament signed these bills. In the first 100 days of the protests, 248 farmers died on the borders outside New Delhi (MN, 2021). Some have died from health issues brought on by the harsh conditions of the protests, while others by suicide. On India's republic day, January 26, 2021, 200,000 tractors filled the streets around Delhi. However, these bills, like the green revolution, promised growth and sustainability for farmers; however, opposition parties have titled these three bills as "death warrants" for the agricultural sector (BBC, 2021). Arvind

Kejriwal, a national convener of the opposition party, says, "The three anti-farmer laws are a death warrant for the country's farmers. If these laws are implemented, agriculture in India will go into the hands of a few industrialists and the farmers will be devastated. If these laws are implemented, then the farmers of India will be laborers in their own land." (Hindustan Times, 2021). The three new bills have the following language:

Bill No. 112- C, 2020. Farmer (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020. The purpose of this bill is written as follows "to provide for a national framework on farming agreements that protects and empowers farmers to engage with agri-business firms, processors, wholesalers, exporters or large retailers for farm services and sale of future farming produce at a mutually agreed remunerative price framework in a fair and transparent manner and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto" (Bill No. 112-C of 2020).

Bill No. 113, 2020. Farmer's Produce Trade and Commerce Bill, 2020 acts "to provide for the creation of an ecosystem where the farmers and traders enjoy the freedom of choice relating to sale and purchase of farmers' produce which facilitates remunerative prices through competitive alternative trading channels; to promote efficient, transparent and barrier-free inter-State and intra-State trade and commerce of farmers' produce outside the physical premises of markets or deemed markets notified under various State agricultural produce market legislations; to provide a facilitative framework for electronic trading and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto." (Bill No. 113 of 2020)

Bill No. 111 Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020 acts "to regulate the production, supply and distribution of, and trade and commerce in, certain commodities which are declared as essential commodities and specified in the Schedule to that Act."

The central government claims these bills will modernize farming in India, however there are significant criticisms of the bills. Mostly centering around the idea that these bills were designed to help big corporations have complete control over agriculture. Some notable criticisms around these bills is that they work to eliminate the minimum price guarantee, anti-hoarding provisions, and the process of dispute resolution for farmers. Minimum support price acts as a minimum wage and protects farmers from market volatility and natural disasters such as droughts and floods.

Prior to the introduction of these bills, farmers would bring their produce to state-sponsored markets and ensure they get a fair price for their produce with minimum support price guarantee. Wholesale and retail traders would also come to these markets to buy the product through auctions. However, these three new bills now allow farmers to sell their produce anywhere, which is harmful to the farmers because if they are not satisfied with prices from private buyers, they have little bargaining power and are left with no backup options making farmers vulnerable to big corporations (BBC, 2021). These bills also eliminate anti-hoarding provisions, in the past the law put limits on stockpiles of agricultural products that private companies could keep, the new bills have eliminated these limits. This will drive up the costs for consumers and allow for the corporations to exploit the farmers. The new bills also make it nearly impossible for farmers to engage in the dispute resolution process with buyers. These bills are changing the landscape for the relationship between the product sellers and buyers.

The 2020 farm bills and the green revolution are examples of past and current government actions which have directly created barriers for farmers, the literature discussed in the next section reveals whether barriers such as financial distress are connected with farmer suicides.

### **Chapter 3: Literature Review**

Financial hardship is an individual's inability to meet basic living expenses for goods and services necessary for survival for themselves and their dependents (Cornell Law). Individuals experiencing financial hardship are at an increased risk of developing mental problems, depression, and self-harm behaviors. (Kiely et al., 2015; Mirowsky & Ross, 2001; Barnes et al., 2016). Economists have determined that suicide is not an act solely from social isolation or mental illness (Marcotte, 2003). Financial and Economic Distress plays a significant role in bringing about mental health issues that may result in attempted suicide. Bradshaw & Ellison, 2010 hypothesised "Financial Hardship (both objective and subjective), will be positively associated with psychological distress." The objective measures of financial hardship included low income, while the subjective measures of financial hardship included individuals' feelings of their socioeconomic standing. The 1998 General Social Survey (GSS) data was analyzed to test this hypothesis. The GSS is a database created by NORC at the University of Chicago; NORC designed the GSS to provide accessible sociological and attitudinal data for scholars, students, and policymakers. The analysis results showed that both objective and subjective measures of financial hardship have a moderate positive correlation with psychological distress (Bradshaw, Ellison 2010).

Gill (2004) argues in his article *Economic Distress and Farmer Suicides in Rural Punjab* that financial distress for farmers in Punjab is due to a post- Green Revolution phase of agriculture development in Punjab. After the initial growth that the green revolution brought to farming in Punjab in the mid-1960s, the technology quickly became exhausted in the 1980s, generating the pressure of financial distress among the peasantry and agricultural laborers. The effects of the green revolution corrupted Punjab's farmers and agricultural workers with economic hardship, crop failures, unemployment, and indebtedness that have pushed victims to take their own lives (Gill, 2004). This article cites multiple studies that report on the causes of suicides. In this article, the first study referenced examined 53 confirmed cases of suicides spread over 14 villages in Punjab. The report indicated that 45.2% of the victims were landless laborers, and 24.5% percent were small and marginal farmers (0-5 acre landholding), 18% were lower medium farmers (5-10 acre landholding), 5.6% were upper-medium farmers, and 5.6% were large farmers (15 and above acres of landholdings). Economic causes such as indebtedness, loss of status, lack of resources, and crop failure accounted for 42.1% of the suicides. The rest of the suicides were related to family discord accounting, alcohol and illicit drug use, death in the family, quarrels with in-laws, and impotence. (Bhalla et al.,) Similarly, Iyer & Manick (2002) examined 80 suicide cases from 7 villages. The results for causes of suicide differed, revealed that economic factors contributed to 78.75 percent of suicides among the 80 studied cases. The economic factors studied were pauperization and marginalization, crop failure/social factors, and poverty/unemployment (Iyer & Manick, 2002). The studies in this article show a strong correlation between farmer suicides and financial distress.

A study titled "Magnitude and Determinants of Indebtedness Among Farmers in Punjab" further examines the purposes behind debt accumulation among farmers in Punjab, this study is

based on primary survey data from the agricultural year of 2012-2013 which examined the purposes behind debt accumulation among farmers in Punjab. This study uses a total sample of 300 farmers comprising 28 marginal farmers, 66 small farmers, 79 semi-medium farmers, 102 medium farmers, and 25 large farmers. The survey identified that 57 percent of the credit taken was used for productive purposes, such as farm inputs, farm machinery, and agricultural land. Forty-two percent of the credit taken was for non-productive loan purposes such as housing loans, consumer loans, health care, and social ceremonies. Farmers take credit from institutional and non-institutional sources, and the most popular non-institutional sources are from commission agents (arthiyas). Arthiyas act both as middlemen and major sources of loans for farmers in Punjab. They serve as facilitators between the farmers and the buyers, arranging various transactions, auctions, and payments for the sellers. They assist with the loading and unloading, cleaning, and delivery of the products to the buyers. The findings of the survey report that the "average farm household in the state was indebted to an institutional source of credit to the tune of Rupees. 1,33,844 (61.37 per cent), while that from the non-institutional sources was Rs. 84,248 (38.63 per cent)." (Singh et al., 2013).

## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

This a cross-sectional study utilizing qualitative interview methods. Participants were selected based on inclusion/exclusions criteria; the inclusion criteria for this study are those over the age of 18 and those who either had or have a relationship to an individual significantly harmed by farmer suicides in Punjab. Participants were recruited through the researcher's personal network using social media; recruitment followed the following five-step process: (1) A flyer was posted to social media, asking those who were interested to send a direct message to the researcher (2)

upon interest, an interview time was scheduled. The researcher sent a zoom link the night before the interview (3) 30 - 45 minute interviews were conducted following an interview protocol (4) At the end of each interview, snowball sampling was used to find additional participants. Participants for this study were only interviewed once regarding their experience with farmer suicides. This study explores a range of experiences among those impacted; this study does not generalize all individuals affected by farmer suicide in Punjab.

This study interviews eight individuals who have a relationship with an individual who has attempted farmer suicide in Punjab. The central question of each interview was “Can you tell me the story about the farmer that either attempted or died by suicide.”. Follow up probing questions were asked to guide the conversation in a way where the interviewees story was clear to the researcher. Probing questions included but were not limited to: Was the farmer in any type of debt? Did any political factor play a role in their suicide or attempt? What role did personal relationships play? Can you generally recall or locate when the farmer began to have trouble? A detailed interview protocol can be found in Appendix A.

Data are analyzed using the thematic analysis method; this is where the researcher will attempt to discover themes within the interviews. "Using thematic analysis in psychology" (Braun & Clarke, 2006) illustrates the thematic analysis method that is utilized to interpret data. "A theme captures something important about the data concerning the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set." (Bruan & Clarke). I follow a six-phase approach to the thematic analysis described in the Bruan and Clarke article; (1) familiarizing yourself with your data (2) generating initial codes (3) searching for themes (4) reviewing themes (5) defining and naming themes (6) producing the report. The methodology approach that will be followed throughout this study is best fitted to understand the complex and

multifaceted dimensions of farmer suicides. Understanding why one decides to end their lives requires in-depth thematic analysis into their struggles and stressors

## **Chapter 5: Results & Discussion**

The sample for this study consists of eight individuals who all identify as Punjabi. Participants reside in various locations around the world, including Washington, California, Toronto, and Punjab. The age range of the participants is from 19 years old- 60 years old, four of the participants identified as females, and four of the participants identified as male. Each participant knows of an individual who has died of farmer suicide in Punjab. All eight of the farmers who died identified as male and were marginal farmers, meaning they have less than one hectare (2.5 acres) of farmland. The age range of the deceased is from 30 years old- 75 years old. One farmer died in 2013, one farmer died in 2015, one farmer died in 2016, two farmers died in 2017, two farmers died in 2018, and one farmer died in 2021. All farmers who died are from Punjab, India. Detailed biographies can be found in Appendix B.

Eight interviews were qualitatively analyzed for this project, and pseudonyms were used for all participants to maintain confidentiality. The results section is separated into five sections each reporting a different theme. Additional quotes for each theme can be found in Appendix C.

### **Theme I: Patriarchy**

Patriarchy is the idea that farming in Punjab is mainly male-dominated, farms are handed down to the eldest male in the family, and men are primarily responsible for the decisions and operations of the farm. This system can create undue stress for male farmers in this position.

Each interviewee discussed how the pressure of patriarchy was visible in the farmers. K.A opened up about where the patriarchy in his family stems from:

“My uncle was caught up in the Punjabi stigma that because he is the male of the family, his family's financial situation relies on him. In Punjabi culture, men are looked upon as breadwinners, and if you cannot provide for your family. Like with my uncle, his wife and family judged him and made him feel inadequate for not providing a high education for his children on top of paying the bills and keeping the farm running.” - K.A

L.S explains how the stress of patriarchy is isolating for the farmers:

“My father held the burden of our family's financial situation on his own. My mother, siblings, and I didn't even know that we were in such a deep debt; we knew we had money issues. But we never knew how bad those issues were. We only learned about the financial situation after his death. My father took on the stress for the rest of my family, and now that stress has been passed onto me because I am the oldest son. I hope I can take his struggles as a lesson.” - L.S

The interviews revealed that the oldest son of a family is given the responsibility to financially take care of the family and keep up with the maintenance of the land. If the oldest son of a family is not capable of such responsibility, it is looked down upon by Punjabi culture and those who follow it. Since incompetence is taken negatively, the farmers often internalize it when problems arise, such as pest infestation, soil degradation, or bad weather, all learning to a bad cropping season. Under distress, farmers often attempt to find solutions on their own by taking out additional loans, putting them deeper into debt.

## Theme II: The Value of Land

The value of land for a farmer in Punjab goes beyond monetary value; the land is passed down from generation to generation. The land is seen as a part of the family history; owning it comes with the responsibility to uphold the family legacy. Six of the interviewees commented on the importance of land, each having complementary views over the topic. S.J and N.D share how significant the land was to the farmer:

“The government thinks that a farmer can sell his acres of land or put it on lease and move on with their lives to new projects. However, when my grandpa was forced to sell his land to create the bypass, even though he had a new piece of land, he became depressed because he knew that he lost something that had been his family's history for generations.” - S.J

"The land has been passed down from generation to generation. It's not seen as a mere business where farmers wouldn't get too attached to the land and sell their land and buy maybe a store or go into trucking or whatever. Land to a Punjabi farmer is the primary source of livelihood for a family. That land has fed and took care of generations of family members; it's a symbol of a family's history. In industrialized nations, you can emotionally and financially afford to sell the land and move onto different industries. Whereas in Punjab, Rajasthan, or any state in India, it's like you necessarily don't have that option." -N.D

The quotes demonstrate that land is a deeply personal experience for the farmer who has been tasked with taking care of it. However, the central government does not take the relationship between the farmer and his land into consideration when creating infrastructures around Punjab.

S.J's grandfather sold the land to the government so that they could build a road near his house, however the loss of that land became unbearable to him. N.D quotes highlight how land is seen as the center of a Punjabi farmer's life. The land is a provider of food, income, and security for a family, it is also a physical symbol of the family's history of hard work. The farmer who has the responsibility of upholding the family legacy is given a heavy task.

“There is a famous saying that I think is relevant to the story of my friend who passed away. A farmer's fields and his life are one and the same. If his field succeeds, he succeeds. If his field fails, he fails.” - SS

Often land has been in the care of a family for generations. The land has seen indigenous methods of farming, as well as post-green revolution farming methods. In general, the land in Punjab is degrading, and the current generation of farmers are stuck with the unfortunate luck of determining what is next for their families' land.

### Theme III: Financial Hardship

Financial hardship for a farmer develops from accumulating a debt level so high that the farmer is often no longer able to keep up with the complexities of Punjabi farming. Financial hardship is a significant factor in farmers developing mental health issues such as depression. All eight interviewees revealed that financial hardship was the leading cause of the farmers' mental health issues. S.S and S.J both share stories of loved ones who got caught up in the farming debt cycles.

“My friend had some excellent crop seasons, and he built a trusting relationship with his arthiya. But, then due to natural circumstances, he began to have bad seasons. He got into

debt of 50- 60 lakh, while his crops were worth around 15 lakh. He fell into deep debt with the arithya [middleman], and in order to pay him back, he had to start giving him everything he earned and had. My friend's debt was almost triple the worth of his actual crops, and he had a couple of family weddings he had to help pay for. In the end, he was so deep in debt he saw no way out, and the arthiya did not understand his situation. So, my friend decided to take his life.” - S.S

“My grandfather's troubles began one season when his land became heavily damaged due to the weather. It just burned on fire, and nothing was left. It became very dry, water was not accessible, and proper care was not given. Furthermore, he was having trouble paying his tractor bills from there, so his tractor got taken from him by the bank that gave him loans. And then, the bank reminded him of his due date and told him to return the money or else they will take over the home/land. He was falling deep in debt with no way out. From this stress, he started to drink more alcohol, to find some sort of peace. He spent half of his money on alcohol and the other half to pay off loans. This situation left his brain very irritated, and eventually he died from the stress” - S.J

Both S.S and S.J's stories are similar. However, in S.S's story, the farmer took loans from a non-institutional source of credit known as Arthiya, which act as both middlemen and significant sources of loans for farmers. In S.J's story, the farmer took loans from an institutional source of credit, such as a local bank. In both situations, the farmers were not given any assistance or leniency from the sources of credit. Additionally, in both cases, this is known to have led the farmers to take their lives. Both of these deaths occurred in the last five years, signifying that the cycle is currently ongoing.

## Theme IV: Government Failure

For decades the central government has failed to provide efficient outcomes for farmers in Punjab. Prioritizing modernization through government projects has left farmers indebted and unsatisfied with their farmer-hood. Four participants shared thoughts on their belief that farmers are under distress due to years of government failure in the name of modernization. Participants believe that farmers' interests are not looked after and that the government is willing to prioritize profit over farmer quality of life.

K.J shares the story of his uncle-in-law who was forced to sell his land to the government to build a road in its place and how that impacted the farmer's livelihood. Two participants K.J and S.J, have similar stories regarding the suicide of their loved ones; the two stories display an intersection of issues faced by farmers in Punjab. The farmers in these stories inherited land from the previous generation due to being the family's oldest son, along with the land came the responsibility of being the sole provider for the rest of the family. Both farmers were asked to sell their land to the government at insufficient prices, causing financial distress. The farmers were also deeply connected with the land, which led to their feeling of inadequacy after selling the land to build a road. The build-up of encountering such conflicts led to both farmers dying by suicide. Here is a quote from K.J's story; quotes from S.J's story can be found in the Appendix C.

“The biggest issue for my uncle-in-law was that a new road was being built near his farmland. The local government in that area wanted to extend the road through his farm. He kept trying to explain how that will take a big chunk of his land away and decrease his income from farming. He believed that the road would have long-term negative effects for him and the other farmers the road creation would displace. He used to talk about how

for a single road, the government is willing to sacrifice the livelihoods of its people. He took on a long fight with the local government. But in the end, they were not agreeing, he felt like there was nothing more that he could do, and he was overwhelmed by the situation. He believed that the government was above him. He thought there's nothing a farmer can do against the government. It is not a high-paying job. He does not have the resources to protect his land and his family from the latest government project. In the end, he decided to go out on his farm and drink poison. The government went ahead and built the road, and it set the entire family back on so many levels. The road took away the providing member of a family, the youngest brother of four sisters. To this day, that family continues to struggle. It almost seems like the government is willing to sacrifice farmers for modernization, even starting with the Green Revolution. They thought that modernization would fix the country's problems, so they forced these harmful farming techniques onto the farmers. Indigenous farmers were doing so much better for themselves, and then modern farming came and brought all these troubles. Now, they're trying to modernize India more with the roads and new laws. But they aren't taking into account what it costs those who have to live with these changes daily.” - K.J

Another Participant, K.A holds the green revolution accountable for the distress her uncle faced in his life. Although he was not alive at the time of the green revolution, the land he inherited came with a set of issues that have yet to be fully understood. Due to the harsh conditions of farming created first by the green revolution, being a farmer in Punjab means putting your life on the line for your crops.

“I feel like the issues that my uncle encountered can be traced back to the green revolution. We don't even fully know how the green revolution impacted the farmers in

Punjab. Kids are being born with neurological disorders or increasing cancer rates due to the pesticides and fertilizers that are now required for farming to take place. Being a farmer in Punjab, you risk your life and your families' lives, and the government continues to show no regard for those that feed the mouths of the countries. There's no happy side of farming, that's the harsh reality of it, there's no happy side. I think that also adds to why farmers commit suicide, because they know like their hands are tied behind their backs.” - K.A

The central government's attempt to unjustly modernize India is displayed through the implementation of the green revolution, the building of roads, and currently through the 2020 farm bills.

### Theme V: 2020 farm bills

The 2020 farm bills are at the forefront of farmers in Punjab; it is seen as the central government's latest bad agricultural policy decision. Five participants commented that they have a great concern that the farm bills will not promote farmer growth and wellbeing. G.R shares the most recent story of suicide. He talks about his uncle, who died in March 2021 at the farmer protest asking the government to repeal the farm bills.

"My mother's brother took his life at the farmer's protest. I would have a phone conversation with him often throughout the last few months. The farmers' protests asking the government to repeal the three bills have been going on since November. My Uncle has had a permanent trolley parked at the protest site since the start. People from my Uncle's village cycle through every few weeks to ensure that they are present in protest while still going back home to see their families and tend to their farming. My Uncle

would share with me the cruel conditions of the protest during our phone conversation. He talked about how during the winter months being out there on the rainy streets was unbearable. My Uncle had a lot of stress from his farming debt problems. He said he felt hopeless about the future. He was disappointed that the central government refused to acknowledge the efforts of the protest. He died by suicide at the protests back in March 2021." -G.R

K.A comments on the ways in which these farm bills will further put farmers at a disadvantage.

“The farmer's protest has shed greater light on the issues farmers have been dealing with for generations. They are not getting paid enough for their crops, are being forced to sell their land, and get huge amounts of debt. Now, these bills are taking away the protection of the arthiyas that have given farmers the minimum price they deserve for their hard owned work. It is devastating to see the government continue to make the same mistakes, putting farmers more and more at risk.” - K.A

G.R's story and K.A's observations highlight the emotions behind the farmer's protest. Farmers are risking their lives to protest because they genuinely believe that if these bills are not repealed, they will fall deeper into debt than ever before. However, the lack of response from the government has left farmers feeling a sense of hopelessness.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

Previous research has identified a positive correlation between financial distress and psychological distress (Bradshaw, Ellison 2010); research has also determined that financial distress for farmers in Punjab is caused primarily by indebtedness. Farmers find themselves

indebted due to crop failures, and loans are taken out for productive and non-productive purposes such as farm inputs, farm machinery, consumer loans, health care, and social ceremonies (Singh et al., 2013). This study uses qualitative data to expand on the findings of previous studies. Along with determining that financial distress is a cause of farmer suicides, the interviews revealed that the severity of financial distress results from a history of government failures and patriarchal cultural norms.

Historically, policies such as the green revolution have disadvantaged farmers from achieving the crop yields needed to sustain their families lives. The current generation of farmers has inherited land that requires expensive inputs such as chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides, which outputs the bare minimum needed for a farmer to profit.

Patriarchal cultural norms put farmers under pressure to take care of their families, preserve their family history through the upkeep of their land, and give grief if they cannot fulfill their role as the family's son.

Furthermore, the 2020 farm bills are alarming since they take away the guarantee of payment for farmers. As a result, farmers will have to work harder than ever before to sell their crops, which is expected to create higher rates of financial distress among farmers. Although farmer suicides have existed since the late '80s in Punjab, this study reveals that the phenomenon is ongoing.

## Policy Recommendation

The farmer suicide epidemic in Punjab is a product of a history of government policy failures; the livelihood of farmers is a complex and interwoven topic to address through any one piece of policy. However, repealing the 2020 farm bills will eliminate the current and future

damage these bills will bring. Protests demanding the repeal of these laws have been taking place on the streets of Delhi since November 2020. Yet, the best the central government has done is “pause” implementation of the bills. Not only do these bills not address the obstacles that have been burdening farmers, such as degrading soil, debt, and water conflicts, but they add an entirely different set of obstacles. It is abundantly clear that farmers fear the disadvantages these bills will bring through the ongoing farmer protests and the interviews conducted for this study. The participants of this study made it clear that they believe these bills are not for the benefit of farmers, which is why this analysis recommends that the bills be repealed immediately. Once the repeal is complete, policymakers should look at India’s agricultural problem with value for farmer livelihood.

### Limitations & Future Research

One limitation of this study is that the sample size is small; a larger sample size would provide more evidence of the phenomenon. In addition, this analysis only documents eight cases over eight years, and if more cases were analyzed it could better help researchers pinpoint trends of recent suicides. The sample size being small for this analysis is due to the stigma around mental health in the Punjabi community. Oftentimes, individuals who were qualified to participate in the study did not want to because they believed that talking about their loved ones' mental health struggles is perceived as talking negatively about the deceased. The restrictions that came along with Covid- 19 also limited the sample size of this population, and it was challenging to have meaningful, trusting connections with participants online.

We have seen how the green revolution has disadvantaged farmers for generations after its implementation. Therefore, policymakers and researchers should keep the lessons of the green

revolution in mind when moving forward. Suppose the central government decides to ignore the pleas of the farmers and implement the bills. In that case, researchers should research the 2020 farm bills and how they impact farmers' well-being to combat the next generation of farmers from being distressed with similar disadvantages. Furthermore, the implementation of these bills should be tracked at a socioeconomic level.

## Appendix A : Interview Protocol

Thank you so much for meeting with me. I am working on a study about farmer suicides in Punjab for my Master's in Policy Studies Capstone project. For this interview, I am interested in learning about your experiences with farmer suicides in Punjab and how they relate to the policies that the Indian government has been implementing.

Typically, the interviews take from about 45 minutes to an hour. If you feel it is necessary to go longer, that would be just fine. Also, you are free to stop this interview at any time.

- Did you receive the consent form?
- Do you have any questions for me before we begin?
- If it's okay with you, I'm going to start recording.

### Opening:

We are going to start by getting some basic questions out of the way before we begin.

1. Do you know a farmer in punjab who has either attempted or died by farmer suicide.
2. Who is this person in relation to you?
3. How old was this person?
4. What did they identify as? Male or Female?

Farmers having less than two hectares (five acres) of land are called small farmers and those having less than one hectare (2.5 acres) are called marginal farmers

5. Would you say the farmer you are connected to is a small farmer, or a marginal farmer?
6. Was the farmer you know successful in their attempt at suicide?

### Personal experiences:

7. Can you tell me the story about the farmer that either attempted or died by suicide.
  - Ask questions like “can you give me an example of what you mean by debt?”, “what do you mean he was stressed?”, “what does that look like?”.

### Follow up questions if relevant to the conversation (Probing Questions):

8. Was the farmer in any type of debt? Who was that debt to?
9. Did any political factor play a role in their suicide or attempt of ?
10. What role did policies play in this suicide?

11. What role did economics play in this suicide?
12. What role did relationships play?
13. Can you generally recall or locate when the farmer began to have troubles.
14. Did they talk to anyone about their troubles? Such as Village Mayors, or other government members?
15. What kind of policies or assistance from the government would have improved things for the farmer?

### Snowball Sampling

In this final section, I would simply like to ask you for reference.

1. Can you refer me to other individuals who have experience with farmer suicides in Punjab, India.
2. Can I use your name?

**Appendix B: Breakdown of participant demographics**

SS lives in Punjab, India specifically in Fatehgarh Sahib District. He shares the story of his friend who died by farmer suicide in 2018. His friend was a 50-year-old male and identified as a Marginal farmer.

KJ lives in Seattle, Washington, and shares the story of her uncle-in-law in Punjab, who died by farmer suicide in 2018. Her uncle-in-law was a 30-year-old male and identified as a Marginal farmer.

BM lives in Seattle, Washington, and shares the story of her father, who passed away in 2013 by farmer suicide. Her father was a 50-year-old male and identified as a marginal farmer.

SJ lives in Toronto, Canada, and shares the story of her grandfather, who died by farmer suicide in 2016. Her grandfather was a 75-year-old male and identified as a marginal farmer.

KA lives in Stockton, California, and shares the story of her uncle who died by farmer suicide in Punjab in 2015. Her uncle was a 40-year-old male and identified as a marginal farmer.

ND lives in California, and shares the story of his father's younger brother, who died by farmer suicide in 2017. His uncle's age is unknown, and identified as a marginal farmer.

LS's lives in Punjab, India, and shares the story of his Father who died by farmer suicide in 2017. His father was a 60-year-old male , and identified as a marginal farmer.

GR lives in Punjab, India, and shares the story of his Mother's older brother who died by farmer suicide in 2021. He was a 50-year-old male, and identified as a marginal farmer.

## Appendix C: Quotes for Each Theme

### “Patriarchy”

“Usually in Punjab, in a family, one person brings in the income and looks after the family. That person is also responsible for discussing with the arthiyas about money and farming. The person I knew found this lonely; there was no one he could talk to, like from the beginning of debt problems, he couldn't tell his family. I personally only found out about his condition once he was at the hospital that his arthiya cheated him.” - SS

“There was so much in the air for him; he was the youngest of the family. However, because he was the only brother of four sisters, all the pressure of the family farming business fell on him. He also had to worry about saving enough money to support his sisters, and he had daughters to marry off. All of this was expected from him, even though he had a few lousy crop seasons.” - KJ

“Farming is very male-dominated. Once a farmer is ready to retire, the farmer passes the land over to his sons. However many three might be, the land gets split between them. The stress of farming gets passed down from generation to generation. This is what happened with my grandpa; he inherited his father's farming stresses.” - SJ

“In Punjab, it is common for one person to control and take responsibility for the whole family. Usually, that person is the oldest male in the family.” - BM

“My uncle was caught up in the Punjabi stigma that because he is the male of the family, his family's financial situation relies on him. In Punjabi culture, men are looked upon as breadwinners, and if you cannot provide for your family. Like my uncle, his wife and

family judged him and made him feel inadequate for not providing a high education for his children on top of paying the bills and keeping the farm running.” - KA

“My uncle definitely had a financial burden, my aunts would just stay home so it was on him to provide for the entire family. Which was a significant amount of the stress that he felt. It’s sad because it’s not a choice he made, it was just something that was expected of him as the man in the family.” -ND

“My father held the burden of our family's financial situation on his own. My mother, siblings, and I didn't even know that we were in such a deep debt; we knew we had money issues. But we never knew how bad those issues were. We only learned about the financial situation after his death. My father took on the stress for the rest of my family, and now that stress has been passed onto me because I am the oldest son. I hope I can take his struggles as a lesson.” - LS

"My mother's brother was a good man. He always provided for his family, took care of them financially and emotionally. He was the ideal Punjabi Son. Now that I look back, I see that he was taking care of everyone while no one ever took care of him. I don't think anyone thought to take care of him; everyone just assumed he had it figured out since he was the oldest son of the family." -GR

“The Value of Land”

“Farmers' fields come from their ancestors; the elders in a family grew crops on those farms, the current farmer grew up playing in them. Those fields became family, and I remember my grandfather planted a tree, and my father grew up as the tree grew. And

then my father planted a tree, and I always remembered seeing it and the feelings connected to my father's fields.” - BM

“The government thinks that a farmer can sell his acres of land or put it on lease and move on with their lives to new projects. However, when my grandpa was forced to sell his land to create the bypass, even though he had a new piece of land, he became depressed because he knew that he lost something that had been his family's history for generations.” - SJ

“There is a famous saying that I think is relevant to the story of my friend who passed away. A farmer's fields and his life are one and the same. If his field succeeds, he succeeds. If his field fails, he fails.” - SS

"The lands have been passed down from generation to generation. It's not seen as a mere business where farmers wouldn't get too attached to the land and sell their land and buy maybe a store or go into trucking or whatever. Land to a Punjabi farmer is the primary source of livelihood for a family. That land has fed and took care of generations of family members; it's a symbol of a family's history. In industrialized nations, you can emotionally and financially afford to sell the land and move onto different industries. Whereas in Punjab, Rajasthan, or any state in India, it's like you necessarily don't have that option." -ND

“A farmer’s land is like a mother’s love for her child. Their land brings them respect and honor.” - LS

“Financial Hardship”

“My friend had some excellent crop seasons, and he built a trusting relationship with his arthiya. But, then due to natural circumstances, he began to have bad seasons. He got into debt of 50- 60 lakh, while his crops were worth around 15 lakh. He fell into deep debt with the arithya, and in order to pay him back, he had to start giving him everything he earned and had. My friend's debt was almost triple the worth of his actual crops, and he had a couple of family weddings he had to help pay for. In the end, he was so deep in debt he saw no way out, and the arthiya did not understand his situation. So, my friend decided to take his life.” - SS

“My father invested so much money into his field, and he barely had any extra savings. After being wrongfully arrested for religious issues, he fell behind in his farming and had to take loans to stay afloat. He had new costs such as lawyers for his court case, all while interest was building on the loans he had to buy farming equipment and resources for his farm. He also had to pay for my and my brother's education. We were both in college at the time. He was very behind on his debt, which was a large part of why he fell into depression.” -BM

“My grandfather's troubles began one season when his land became heavily damaged due to the weather. It just burned on fire, and nothing was left. It became very dry, water was not accessible, and proper care was not given. Furthermore, he was having trouble paying his tractor bills from there, so his tractor got taken from him by the bank that gave him loans. And then, the bank reminded him of his due date and told him to return the money or else they will take over the home/land. He was falling deep in debt with no way out.

From this stress, he started to drink more alcohol, to find some sort of peace. He spent half of his money on alcohol and the other half to pay off loans. This situation left his brain very irritated.” - SJ

"The government is at blame because they don't provide sufficient subsidies to farmers in Punjab. In some other states in India, they don't provide any at all. So whatever a farmer earns is what he makes, which is not good because factors outside a farmer's control can set a farmer back for years, and the government is there to help farmers who fall behind. Which accumulates a lot of financial burden for farmers, well at least I know it did for my uncle."- ND

“My father had a trusting relationship with his Arthiya. They were good friends, and my father would even refer to him as an older brother. Unfortunately, my father wasn't very educated, so he trusted Arthiya to handle his money and earnings. At one point, due to some bad crop seasons, my father fell into deep debt with his Arthiya. He was thousands of dollars in debt. Whatever earnings came from the crops, he would give it to the arthiya; this went on for about 5-7 years. Then, one day, the Aarhiya wanted to buy a house or some property, and he changed all my father's property under his name. He justified taking the property because my father was indebted to him. This situation made my father depressed, and he ended up taking his own life in the fields by drinking poison.” - LS

“My mother’s brother was in debt. I don’t know the extent of it but I know he was definitely into some deep debt. I also know that the debt was a significant factor in his depression and death ” -GR

## “Government Failure”

“The biggest issue for my uncle-in-law was that a new road was being built near his farmland. The local government in that area wanted to extend the road through his farm. He kept trying to explain how that will take a big chunk of his land away and decrease his income from farming. He believed that the road would have long-term negative effects for him and the other farmers the road creation would displace. He used to talk about how for a single road, the government is willing to sacrifice the livelihoods of its people. He took on a long fight with the local government. But in the end, they were not agreeing, he felt like there was nothing more that he could do, and he was overwhelmed by the situation. He believed that the government was above him. He thought there's nothing a farmer can do against the government. It is not a high-paying job. He does not have the resources to protect his land and his family from the latest government project. In the end, he decided to go out on his farm and drink poison. The government went ahead and built the road, and it set the entire family back on so many levels. The road took away the providing member of a family, the youngest brother of four sisters. To this day, that family continues to struggle. It almost seems like the government is willing to sacrifice farmers for modernization, even starting with the Green Revolution. They thought that modernization would fix the country's problems, so they forced these harmful farming techniques onto the farmers. Indigenous farmers were doing so much better for themselves, and then modern farming came and brought all these troubles. Now, they're trying to modernize India more with the roads and new laws. But they aren't taking into account what it costs those who have to live with these changes daily.” - KJ

“My grandpa's father was approached about building a road in Nawanshahr amidst his bad farming seasons and already troubled situation. This was a road that many farmers' lands got cut to be made, the farmers had to sell their land at an unfair price and were told to purchase land elsewhere. My grandfather had to do just that, he had to sell his land, and purchase new land elsewhere. Farming is my grandfather's livelihood, they took away his land that had been in his family for ages. Although he was given money, it wasn't enough money to pay off the debts due to bad seasons and to also buy another piece of land. It's crazy to think about how a road is worth more to the government than the farmers' homes, families, and lives. Yeah. So, I feel like they were trying to modernize India, and that's a big deal. They're trying to make it like other countries like Canada and the US. The bypass that killed my grandfather is the latest example of India trying to be modern. Unjust modernization is killing Punjab's farmers” - SJ

“I feel like the issues that my uncle encountered can be traced back to the green revolution. We don't even fully know how the green revolution impacted the farmers in Punjab. Kids are being born with neurological disorders or increasing cancer rates due to the pesticides and fertilizers that are now required for farming to take place. Being a farmer in Punjab, you risk your life and your families' lives, and the government continues to show no regard for those that feed the mouths of the countries. There's no happy side of farming, that's the harsh reality of it, there's no happy side. I think that also adds to why farmers commit suicide, because they know like their hands are tied behind their backs.” - KA

“The government is not doing anything, and the debts are rising.” - SS

“Uhm, I would not say politics directly makes farmers want to kill themselves. However, through a history of bad agricultural policy decisions, the government has made it very difficult for farmers to keep up with their land. It has made it difficult for farmers to recover from something as simple as a bad harvesting season.” - BM

“2020 farm bills”

"My mother's brother took his life at the farmer's protest. I would have a phone conversation with him often throughout the last few months. The farmers' protests asking the government to repeal the three bills have been going on since November. My Uncle has had a permanent trolley parked at the protest site since the start. People from my Uncle's village cycle through every few weeks to ensure that they are present in protest while still going back home to see their families and tend to their farming. My Uncle would share with me the cruel conditions of the protest during our phone conversation. He talked about how during the winter months being out there on the rainy streets was unbearable. My Uncle had a lot of stress from his farming debt problems. He said he felt hopeless about the future. He was disappointed that the central government refused to acknowledge the efforts of the protest. He died by suicide at the protests back in March 2021." -GR

“The 3 laws that were just created put those who either have 50 acres or a couple of acres, all of their farming and hard work is at risk. I wish I could say I was shocked that the government refuses to take back the laws, even though farmers have been protesting for the last 7 months, putting their lives at risk. But knowing this history between farmers

and the central government. I am not surprised at all. They have no respect for our livelihood” - SS

“With the new farm bills, nothing good is left in India. All the protesting farmers think that the government is keeping everything for themselves. Farmers are tired of being mistreated, they have had enough. I don’t see this protest ending anytime soon, because farmers know if they stop protesting that will be the end of any glimmer of hope that remains in being a farmer.” - SJ

“The farmer's protest has shed greater light on the issues farmers have been dealing with for generations. They are not getting paid enough for their crops, are being forced to sell their land, and get huge amounts of debt. Now, these bills are taking away the protection of the arthiyas that have given farmers the minimum price they deserve for their hard owned work. It is devastating to see the government continue to make the same mistakes, putting farmers more and more at risk.” - KA

“ I heard that an average of 28 farmers die by suicide each day since the laws were created.I am kinda relieved that my father isn’t alive today to see these farm bills come into action. He would have been at the protest, but they would have crushed his soul. ”

-BM

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