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Published: May 2, 2013 01:43 IST | Updated: May 2, 2013 03:06 IST

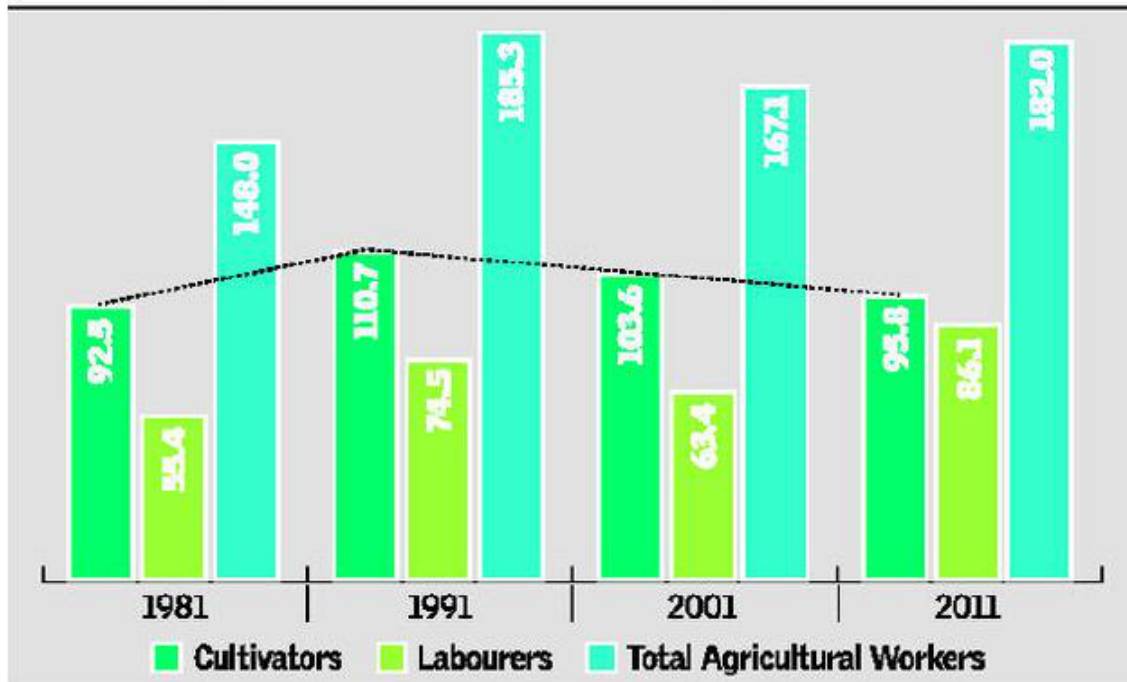
Over 2,000 fewer farmers every day

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The mistaken notion that the 53 per cent of India's population dependent on agriculture are all farmers lead many to dismiss the country's massive farmers' suicides as trivial.
Photo: AP

HOW MANY FARMERS DO WE HAVE?



Source: derived from successive Census of India tables 1981-2011 (numbers rounded off in millions)

The Hindu

The mistaken notion that the 53 per cent of India's population 'dependent on agriculture' are all 'farmers' leads many to dismiss the massive farmers' suicides as trivial

There are nearly 15 million farmers ('Main' cultivators) fewer than there were in 1991. Over 7.7 million less since 2001, as the latest Census data show. On average, that's about 2,035 farmers losing 'Main Cultivator' status every single day for the last 20 years. And in a time of jobless growth, they've had few places to go beyond the lowest, menial ends of the service sector.

A December 2012 report of the Institute of Applied Manpower Research (IAMR) — a part of the Planning Commission — puts it this way: "employment in total and in non-agricultural sectors has not been growing. This jobless growth in recent years has been accompanied by growth in casualization and informalization." It speaks of an "an absolute shift in workers from agriculture of 15 million to services and industry." But many within the sector also likely moved from farmer to agricultural labourer status. Swelling the agrarian underclass.

So how many farmers do we have?

Census 2011 tells us we now have 95.8 million cultivators for whom farming is their main occupation. That's less than 8 per cent of the population. (Down from 103 million in 2001 and 110 million in 1991). Include all marginal cultivators (22.8 million) and that is still less than 10 per cent of the population.

Even if you count together all cultivators and agricultural labourers, the number would be around 263 million or 22 per cent of the population. (Interestingly, this reduced figure comes after a few big states have actually reported a rise in the total number of cultivators. Since 85 per cent of all marginal workers reported more than a 100 days work, this could possibly reflect the reverse pull of MNREGA, among other factors).

Between 1981 and 1991, the number of cultivators (main workers), actually went up from 92 million to 110 million. So the huge decline comes post-1991.

Hold on: aren't 53 per cent of the population farmers?

No. That's a common fallacy. The over 600 million Indians **dependent on agriculture** are not all farmers. They are deployed in an array of related activities — including fisheries. This confusion is widespread and innocent.

Yet, there are also a few whose colossal ignorance leads them to dismiss the country's massive farmers' suicides as trivial. For instance: "at least half of the Indian workforce is engaged in farming. This fact points to a much lower suicide rate per 100,000 individuals for farmers than in the general population." Note how easily those *'engaged in farming'* become *'farmers!'*

As a notion it borders on the whacko. It goes: After all, 53 out of every 100 Indians are farmers. So our 270,940 farm suicides since 1995 are a low number on a population base of over 600 million. So low that we should be agitated over how the suicide rate in the general population can be brought "down to the levels prevailing amongst farmers."

Never mind for now the appalling moral position that a quarter of a million human beings taking their lives is hardly alarming. The Bhopal gas tragedy, the worst industrial disaster in human terms, claimed over 20,000 lives. But in this perverse logic, since that was less than 0.003 per cent of the then population, it is rendered meaningless. That position

says more about its authors than about the suicides. It shows they are clueless about who a farmer is — and about what the data show.

It shows even greater ignorance of who defines and counts a ‘farmer suicide.’ **The Census records cultivators. The police count suicides. The police do not read the Census.** Not for definitions, anyway.

The Census groups the population into workers and non-workers. The latter would be infants, children, students, housewives, unemployed, aged and retired people. Farmers, or cultivators come under ‘Workers’ — *a huge category covering many varied groups*. Now rural workers account for close to 70 per cent of all workers. And rural workers consist of farmers, agricultural labourers and non-farm workers.

Cultivators (main workers) in the Census are barely eight per cent of the population as a whole. (That’s after a two-decade secular decline in this group). The ongoing farm suicides — 184,169 of them since 2001 according to the National Crime Records Bureau — are taking place on a smaller and shrinking base. Their intensity has hardly diminished. In most of the States accounting for two-thirds of all farm suicides, the intensity has likely risen.

Of course distress affects a much wider population dependent on agriculture. (Farmer bankruptcies crush the village carpenter, and even play a role in weaver suicides). The sufferings of others are as real. It is not as if the agricultural labourer or non-farm worker is having a great time. Both sections have seen distress migrations — and suicides. (For that matter the owner of a small industrial unit in an urban city could be distress-hit). Their suicides are no less tragic. But it is vital to know **who officially gets counted as a farmer**. And who gets **listed** in the ‘farmers’ suicides. For that tells us more about the ongoing tragedy and gives us a sense of its awful scale.

Everybody who works in the film industry is not an actor. Everyone in the educational system is not a student. And all those in the 53 per cent of the population related to the farming sector are not farmers. Even among those who are, only a limited group gets counted as such when police and governments make farmers’ suicide lists. Cultivators are counted by the Census. Suicides are recorded by police stations across

the country. The numbers collated by State governments. Very different approaches are involved.

The Census considers someone a cultivator if he or she operates a piece of land — which they may or may not own; State governments and police count only those with a title to land as farmers. The Census records two kinds of cultivators: ‘Main workers’ and ‘marginal workers.’ The latter are more like agricultural labourers or non-farm workers since farming is not their main activity. A ‘Main worker’ in cultivation is someone for whom that is the major occupation for *at least half the year*. That group makes barely eight per cent of the population as a whole.

Suicides among the others in the agrarian world (within that “53 per cent”) won’t be recorded as ‘farmer suicides.’ Try getting State governments and their police to do that! Even within the ‘recognised’ eight per cent, those whose title to land is not clear will not be listed as farmers’ suicides, should they take their own lives. For instance, women and tenant farmers are routinely excluded. Even eldest sons running the farms — with the land still in the names of their aged fathers — would also be omitted.

Police and State governments run the suicide lists, not the Census. Nor does the NCRB, which has neither the vested interest nor the ability to fiddle that data. It merely collates what the State Crime Record Bureaus submit to it. Hence, the Chhattisgarh government could brazenly declare a ‘zero farm suicides’ figure in 2011. That after the State saw over 7,500 of them (by its own admission) between 2006-10. With all the fiddles in the data, the numbers and intensity remain appalling.

Maharashtra revels in such fraud. With close to 54,000 since 1995, the State has been the worst in farm suicides for over a decade. And even those numbers conceal major exclusions. They’ve invented categories like ‘Farmer’s relatives suicides,’ or “non-genuine” suicides, in order to further trim the numbers. So the State governments and their police, have immense power in re-defining who a farmer is. Watch out for more and more States doing ‘a Chhattisgarh’ and declaring ‘zero’ farm suicides in coming months and years.