

# Punjab's killing fields

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The agricultural crisis in the poster state of India's Green Revolution -- Punjab -- seems to have reached its nadir as small farmers there continue to commit suicide at an alarming rate.

These suicides haven't caused a stir at the Centre, unlike those of the Vidarbha and Telangana regions.

But, independent research has revealed that for several years, 2,000-2,500 farmers have been committing suicide every year Punjab. The causes include failure to repay debt because of crop failure, loans incurred to buy seeds/pesticides and land fragmentation leading to a decline in output.

The shocking suicides have been debated in the state for quite some time. Now it become the subject of a one-hour documentary film, *Harvest of Grief*. The film, produced by former UN official Rasil Basu and directed by Anwar Jamalwas screened at India International Centre on Saturday.

Among several layers, it puts together stories of women and children who have been the worst affected, losing their husbands and fathers. The screening was supported by Ektara, an NGO working for the advancement of women.

Inderjit Singh Jaijee, a Chandigarh-based former state legislator and human rights activist quoted in the film, was present.

"Since 1988 we've been trying to bring rural suicide to the government's notice. In 1992, some top officials and politicians asked us to keep quiet in view of the slowly-fading militancy. But even after militancy ceased, there were no talks. We want to know why," he said.

"Only two people have helped us so far -- former presidents K.R. Narayanan and A.P.J. Abdul Kalam. Now, top officials tell us to keep quiet or else the problem of Naxalism will grow," he added.

Jaijee said Bharatiya Kisan Union, has estimated that around 90,000 farmers have committed suicide in Punjab so far.

"The government first denied it but then set up a research body, Institute for Development and Communication. It has pegged the figure at 2,000 per year. Punjab University puts it at 2,500. But the police have recorded only seven suicides in seven years," he added.

It's incredible that the suicides happened in the state which was the biggest success story of the drive in 1960s to be self-sufficient in foodgrain by using fertilizers and high-intensity irrigation. The same tools have now turned Punjab into a graveyard.

The film extensively quoted Vandana Shiva, a noted physicist, activist and founder of organic food brand Navdanya.

After the screening she said: "Punjab has become a land of rice and wheat monocultures. Climate unfriendly practices, not suited to Punjab's land type, have brought the state to this fate. Now, they are trying to grow oranges there which will again be a waste."

Long-term use of pesticides, which has contaminated groundwater, has turned the state's Malwa region into a cancer belt. Almost every family in Bhatinda district has a cancer patient. The film brings out the macabre reality of The Cancer Express -- a train carrying cancer patients from Bhatinda to Bikaner, which has a charity hospital. Then there is the story of a canal that takes water into Haryana, which has given birth to a new business -- of fishing out bodies of the farmers who have committed suicide.

Journalist-activist Pradeep Bidwai said agriculture has become unviable for the vast majority of India's poor who survive only on the land they till. "The small farmers are unable to cope with the high prices of inputs.

"We have stopped investing in agriculture and the large-scale irrigation projects, based on the likes of the Bhakra Nangal Dam, have proved a failure. There needs to be a major change in the way agriculture is being practised in the country," he said.

Jaijee hoped that the film will prod the central government to do something for the beleaguered agricultural state.

Right now, it appears that the crops are not exactly lush and drooping under their own good health in the fields of Punjab as has been immortalised in innumerable Bollywood films.