

Green Revolution's wounded Warriors

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Once the harbinger of the Green Revolution in the country, the prototypical farmer of Punjab is no longer prosperous. The golden fields no longer inspire Baisakhi celebrations as more than 60 per cent of the state's cultivators are in debt. In what was previously considered the nation's grain bowl, the per farmer debt has reached Rs 45,000 - the highest in India - and there is hardly any institutional lending system. Private money-lenders take a 36 per cent interest.

According to the agricultural expert, Dr Suchha Singh Gill, of Punjabi University, Patiala, some 36 per cent of the state's peasants want to discontinue farming as it is not profitable, with their incomes falling far short of justifying the huge investments they make.

With land getting fragmented, and its productivity going down, fertilisers and irrigation becoming more expensive and the minimum support price not rising, the real income of farmers has dipped considerably. Most of them feel that cultivation is no longer a viable option, particularly because 76 per cent of them are small and marginal, owning less than five acres. The number of suicides by farmers because of their increasing debts was between 2,500 and 5,000 during the past 10 years. Dr Gill thinks that the situation will reach an alarming stage unless effective corrective measures were taken immediately.

Sociologists feel that such social factors as expensive family ceremonies, like marriages, too, have forced debts on farmers. However, in the peripheral rural areas of cities like Chandigarh, Ludhiana and Amritsar, a new trend is discernible. Farmers there are selling their land, the price of which has skyrocketed. "I was in debt as there was no return from agriculture. I sold three acres, paid off my debts and switched over to dealing in real estate to find myself doing well again," said Mr Avtar Singh of Milanpur in Ropar District, near Chandigarh.

But farmers in most parts of Punjab are not so lucky as the prices of their land has not increased very much, leaving them looking for an alternative source of livelihood.

[Courtesy: *The Statesman*]

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