Dead end for labourer’s widow, kids

TRUNCATED LIVES With the man gone — often in suicide — there is no life for the family in the village. Shutting home and going away to the maternal family is the only option — till the kids are grown, and the story begins all over again.

SANDUR/ BARNALA: Visiting a labour colony in any village of the cotton belt in Punjab, you’ll find cold breaths and locked doors punctuating the dilapidated houses lining the streets. These are homes deserted by the widows and orphans of rural labourers, whose death left behind irreversibly altered lives for the survivors. The households in suspense, tell the woeful tale that besets the family of every labourer who dies, whether of natural cause or suicide — more often is the latter.

“25 years ago, a man was in the habit of coming to our house in the absence of his wife. I am waiting for the children to return,” says Gurjant Singh, pointing towards two rooms next to his own kitchen.

It has been long since Gurjant, a farm labourer of Khadri village, lost his younger brother’s children. It would be a while before they are grown-up, which is when Gurjant expects them to return to what was once their home.

Bordered by a debt of Rs. 15,000, his brother Maghar Singh had committed suicide around 15 years back. Unable to find work or manage ration on credit, Maghar’s widow was unable to feed for the little kids. Two years later, she ended it too with a pesticide. As is the custom among rural labourers, the two surviving daughters and a son were left to be brought up by their maternal uncle.

When a labourer commits suicide or dies leaving behind surviving kids, you will readily find his widow and children staying back in the village, says Harjinder Singh, a former sarpanch of Dhamuk, a nearby village.

The life of a labourer’s widow is much worse than a farmer’s. A farmer’s widow usually stays on in the village, as she would have lived to raise the kids on. But a labourer’s widow has no asset but her hands, says Harjinder Singh. Also, nobody lends the widow any money, as she has limited resources to repay. Stride remarks, “no money in the pockets of villagers is any way easier. Often, after the main male member of a family commits suicide, the widow doesn’t eat.”

A farm labourer from Burhanpur, A Sahu, says, “a farm labourer arrested from Burhanpur by the DGP’s office, says Harjinder Singh. Their mother, who suffers from mental retardation,大专ise.

CHILDHOOD YOKED

A study commissioned by the Punjab State Farmers Commission three years ago had confirmed that about 4 per cent of the attached labour in Punjab falls in the category of child labour. Another 37 per cent falls in the age group of 16-20 years.

Their mother, who suffers from mental retardation,大专ise.

Though the small farmer’s kids work, claim they are doing a good job in “raising their children’s”, Jaspal’s daily chores involve fetching the fodder and cleaning cattle sheds, while Jyoti washes dishes and baby-sits the farmer’s kids along with her studies.

Yes, none of the three know what they earn between them.

2. JUNE, 2010

HT, CHANDIGARH