Escape only in death

SILENT PASSING Debt, suicide among farm workers no less rampant than farmers, yet no one, not even the government, takes note

Mansa: A decade back, Nata Singh, an attached labourer of Hadia village, tried to get away from debt by consuming a pesticide. “Unfortunately”, he survived. His miseries survived too. Today, reeling under a debt of Rs 3.6 lakh, including Rs 45,000 borrowed for his medical treatment, he curses those who earned him to the doctor.

Such stories of survival and suicide abound all across the villages of Punjab’s cotton belt.

In his mid-50s, Nata has seen himself as nothing but an attached labourer earning Rs 3,000 annually, and like most labourers, he inherited the debt. But he says there was no “valid” reason behind his attempt to suicide. “I was upset and would often get agitated,” he says. However, Ruppal, his wife who cleans people’s cuttings, knows the real reason. “He was helpless against the debt, and there is no hope of ever paying it back.”

Debt related suicides are common among rural workers as among farmers, says Zora Singh Narwal, president of the Punjab Kisan Mazdoor Union. “But their voice is never heard like farmers. The agri crisis has never been explored beyond the crisis of farmers.”

Even the Punjab government’s own report of a survey of Bathinda and Sangrur districts conducted last year tells that from 2000 to 2008, a total of 1,909 rural workers committed suicide due to debt. Out of these, 450 were from Bathinda and 650 from Sangrur.

“All these people died in sheer hopelessness,” says Narwal.

According to PUL economists who conducted this survey, the condition of labourers in Mansa district would be much grimmer as the conditions there are considered for more oppressive for them.

Yet, the activists feel, the government is doing nothing except conducting one survey after another. “It makes sense, but the government hardly does anything about it, and the media too forgets after reporting the survey,” says Harbhajan Baslai, a rural activist from the CPI.

In the absence of any government support, conditions are even worse for the labourers’ families. Suicide might offer an end to the labourer’s woes, for the family, it is the beginning of yet another struggle. “The worst affected by a debt-related suicide are the children and widows. Neither do they get loan, nor do they have any assets to repay the debt. Children are forced into child labour and widows are sometimes pushed into prostitution. In several cases, they too give up on life,” says Narwal.

It is a strange reality among labourers that when a family falls apart, there is no division of property, but there is division of debt. Nata also inherited Rs 8,000 as debt. He has worked day and night only to see it swell to Rs 70,000 today.

Natal’s health is giving way. He hardly has another three-seven years of work left in him.

His son Amarnand Singh is already a daily-wage for many years, yet “the amount of debt is increasing every year,” Bhupal says.

“Wouldn’t it have been better had I not survived that day?” asks Nata, leaving you at a loss for an answer.

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