

## **Forced Tenancy as a Trajectory of Tenant Farmers' Suicides: A Study of Two Mandals in Nalgonda District (Telangana)**

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### ABSTRACT

Tenant farmers' suicides are a serious issue in Telangana State. They are a largely under-investigated phenomenon, and there has hardly been any research on why they occur. This study will focus on Nalgonda district, which has witnessed more tenant-farmer suicides than any other district in the state. Two mandals in Nalgonda district—Kanagal and Nalgonda—were selected from a list of mandals reporting suicide cases between 2014 and 2017. In-depth interviews were conducted with the families of 39 victims across 16 villages. This paper tries to understand why landless labourers are leasing-in land and the reasons underlying their suicides. It argues that uncertainty surrounding employment in the rural labour market induces tenant farmers to lease-in land. However, they also find it difficult to secure employment within the village and difficult to sustain themselves through farming. Moreover, government policies targeting farm landowners exclude tenant farmers as cultivators who face agricultural risks. This makes them highly vulnerable, leading to suicide.

**Keywords:** Telangana, tenant suicide, forced tenancy, employment uncertainty, pure tenants, indebtedness

**JEL classification:** E24, Q11, Q14, Q15,

I

### INTRODUCTION

The Telangana State economy continues to be an agrarian one, with a significant share of the population dependent on agriculture for survival. The marginal and small farmers make up about 85 per cent of the agricultural sector in the state (Socio-Economic Caste Census 2011). Based on the *Agricultural Action Plan, 2020–21*, there are 53.6 lakh farmers and 59.15 lakh agricultural labourers in Telangana. The landless labourers have two employment sources in the village: the labour market or leasing of land as tenants. In such a context, it is important to understand the nature and functioning of the rural labour market, as it plays an important and decisive role in rural livelihoods. One of the biggest challenges that the rural labour market currently faces is providing stable wage employment in villages throughout the year (Chand and Srivastava, 2014). The lack of year-round employment opportunities has resulted due to the seasonal nature of economic activity in rain-fed rural areas. And when the rural labour market is uncertain or inactive, labourers look for alternative avenues of employment. In such a situation, agricultural labourers are forced to look towards the land-lease market for employment. Therefore, the growth of the leased-in land by the landless indicates a larger crisis in agriculture.

It is unfortunate that farmers, who are important cogs in the wheel of agrarian economy, currently face an insecure future that pushes many of them to attempt suicide

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due to rising debt. Based on the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data for 2017 and 2018, Telangana stood third after Maharashtra (2,239 deaths in 2017 and 2,426 in 2018) and Karnataka (1,365 farmer suicides in 2017 and 1,365 in 2018) in terms of farmer suicides. The state reported 846 farmer suicides in 2017 and 900 in 2018.

Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Hyderabad, and Rythu Swarajya Vedika (RSV)—which are working towards ensuring sustainable livelihoods for agricultural communities in Telangana—conducted a collaborative field study in 2018 on farmers suicides in Telangana. They collected primary survey data at the household level on victims, from June 2014 to April 2018. The study found that 75 per cent of the farmers who died by suicide in Telangana were tenant farmers. This is in line with other studies that indicate that tenant farmers account for 80 per cent of farmer suicides in the country due to high rental rates and dependence on informal sources of credit (Arora, 2021; Reddy *et al.*, 2020; Chand *et al.*, 2017). The most recent incident was of a pure tenant and his family (four persons) who died of suicide at their residence in Malkapalli village, Kasipet mandal, Mancherial district, on 25 March 2021. The tenant had been unable to repay debts amounting to Rs. 8 lakh, due to which they decided to take their lives. The tenant had taken on rent (fixed cash) 10 acres to cultivate cotton crop and had experienced crop failure for the last three years.

In view of the above context, this paper highlights that without any employment alternatives in villages or support mechanisms, many tenants have lost their lives due to forced tenancy (when farmers are compelled to enter the land-lease market to survive). These farmers are the real cultivators of the land, but governments have failed to establish proper parameters to define tenant farmers, thus blocking their access to government subsidies. This is because policies geared towards tenant well-being have been poorly implemented. This has adversely impacted tenant farming communities and is part of the reason why these farmers are dying by suicide. Also, it attempts to investigate the reasons for tenant-farmer suicides and the existence of support mechanisms to limit such suicides.

## II

### AN OVERVIEW OF FARMER SUICIDES IN INDIA

A mixed tenant owns some land and also leases the land. A pure tenant is a landless farmer who entirely leases land. The mixed tenant is in a better position in terms of having experience in or knowledge of cultivation compared to a pure tenant. Earlier, most farmers were owner-cultivators-cum-tenants, but this has changed gradually. It is the pure tenants who are emerging in the land-lease market in the villages (Tyagi and Himanshu, 2011; Sreenivasulu, 2020). There is not much literature available on pure tenant suicides. The findings of a few micro-level studies conducted in undivided Andhra Pradesh show that an increasing number of landless labourers were entering the land-lease market (see Sreenivasulu, 2015; Vijay and Sreenivasulu 2013). Kanti's study (2014) tries to identify the reasons for continuing farmer suicides in Warangal district. It states that the issue of farmer suicide emerged in the Warangal

district in Telangana in 1995 and still remains an unending debate. Further it shows that from 1995–2012, Karimnagar (4,433) followed by Warangal and Nizamabad reported the most farmer suicides in Telangana. The reports of Rythu Swarajya Vedika (RSV), a network of organisations working on farmer suicides and farmers' problems in general, estimate that from June 2014 to September 2018, about 3,603 farmers died by suicide in the state of Telangana, and most of them were tenants.<sup>1</sup>

Some empirical studies have shown that the resource adjustment model analyses leasing behaviour by a household as a process of resource adjustment under conditions of incompletely formed markets. The resources identified in the resource adjustment model, which constrain the choice of an agricultural household, are animal power (Bliss and Stern, 1982; Bell, 1976), labour (Pant, 1983; Skoufias 1995), credit (Jaynes, 1982), and managerial ability (Reid, 1976; Eswaran and Kotwal, 1985; Bell and Zusman, 1976). This set of literature attempts to attribute the practice of leasing in, as well as leasing out, land by households to the absence of input markets in the village economy. It is a puzzle for this model that the landless tenants (the so-called pure tenants) without household resources have emerged (Sreenivasulu, 2020). This sort of tenancy can be considered 'forced tenancy' as they are forced to lease-in land for survival. The rural labour market dynamics might be the reason for the emergence of the landless poor as tenants. Irregular rural labour markets have led to the emergence of land-lease markets in rural economies. Consequently, labour supply households prefer becoming cultivators by leasing land rather than participating in the labour market which offers uneven wage employment (Chand and Srivastava, 2014). It has undergone changes, such as the decline in the number of large landowners who have the potential to demand labour (Sreenivasulu, 2020); a rise in the number of non-cultivating landowning households (Vijay, 2012; Vijay and Sreenivasulu, 2013); a decline in agricultural employment (Himanshu and Kundu, 2016; Chand *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) cannot provide full employment throughout the year and a sufficient quantum of work is not available (Verma and Shah, 2012). With no alternative livelihoods, agricultural landless labours are forced to take big risks and enter the land-lease market.

Some studies claim that the small, marginal and tenant farmers are psychologically weak as they do not have risk-bearing capacities which leads them to become distressed.<sup>2</sup> According to Mishra (2007), agrarian crises involve a decline in production or productivity across all crops and a decline in output. Also, rural non-farm employment opportunities are limited, and hence there is an overburden on farm-employment opportunities. The researcher further explains the importance of having sources of income in a family other than the returns from cultivation. Revathi and Galab's study (2007) on farmer suicides showed that crop failure and imperfect markets were not the only reasons for suicides—social detachment and an individualistic orientation also explained why farmers attempted suicide. The small, marginal farmers and tenants cultivate land without any financial assistance from the

government, even in case of crop loss. In areas that lack irrigation facilities, crop failures are common. With the cost of inputs increasing and input suppliers becoming credit lenders, farmers remain in the ultimate debt trap, which leaves them with no control over the quality of inputs. It is a known fact that tenant-farmers depend on high-interest credit for cultivation. When they fail to repay their debt on time (Ram and Singh, 2017), they face problems and cannot get more credit from any source until they repay the first loan. The diversion of farm credit for other purposes is also a factor (Kanti, 2014). The study of Sidhu *et al.* (2011) has found that these farmers were illiterate and many were drug addicts. The reduced productivity of cotton plants, the high costs of digging bore wells for underground water, and spending on social ceremonies are all big contributors to farmer indebtedness, according to another study by Reddy *et al.* (2020).

This literature review highlights key concerns in the debate surrounding farmer suicides. However, limited attention had been paid to understanding tenant issues and tenant-farmers' suicides in the Telangana region where the number of tenants as well as the incidence of farmers' suicides are high. This paper tries to fill these gaps to understand the situation of tenant farmers—the most vulnerable in the farming community—and why they resort to suicide.

### III

#### NEED FOR THE STUDY

According to the Agricultural Census (2011), agriculture in Telangana is characterised by a poor peasant economy: poor peasants account for 92.1 per cent of the total farm households and 62.4 per cent of the area operated. In contrast, large farmers comprised only 0.28 per cent of the total holdings and accounted for 4.01 per cent of the area operated. Based on the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), the recent report titled *Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India, 2019* showed that 373 farmers who cultivated their own land and 188 tenants who cultivated leased-in land have committed suicide. According to the NSSO report no. 571 on Household Ownership and Operational Holdings in India, the percentage of leased-in land was 16.45 (21 per cent of lease holdings) in Telangana. It accounts for 18.59 per cent of the total area owned in the state. It indicates the considerable extent of land under cultivation within the tenancy system. The amount of land under tenancy has increased in recent times as landowning households are shifting from the agriculture sector to the non-farming sector (Sreenivasulu, 2020). These households often continue to own land and lease it out for rent. Small and marginal farmers may also opt to lease-out land because of poor resource endowments and may prefer to work as agricultural labourers (supply-side factor). On the other hand, large, market-oriented farmers (mixed tenants) are acquiring more land to benefit from scale advantages. They lease-in land from not only diversified households, but also from poor peasants, in the form of reverse tenancy. In this context, the growing number of tenants and the extent of land under the tenancy system need to be understood. Given the growing number of tenant-farmer

suicides, we need to understand their causes and incidence and also the socio-economic characteristics of the tenants who committed suicide which has been attempted in the paper. Another key aspect of the study is that it seeks to understand how agricultural labour is forced to lease-in land, which appears to be the primary reason for farmer suicides. Why is the household leased-in land? And also it tries to understand the type of crop cultivation, indebtedness and the need to understand the recent policies which ignore the pure tenants in the Telangana region. It is clear that farmers as well as the tenant-farmers account for a large share of farmer suicides in the past three years in Nalgonda district (District Revenue Offices); yet limited attention had been paid to the tenant-farmers suicides. It is hoped this study is a first step toward closing the research gap; it aims to understand tenant issues and why tenants have lost their lives. It also seeks to highlight the way in which pure tenants/ tenants continue to be excluded from government policies, benefits and face a lack of support mechanisms. It also discusses policy implications for the tenant farmers.

#### IV

##### MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

Sainath (2015) revealed that tenant farmer suicides are not reported as farmer suicides. Instead, such farmers are counted under the category of “others” in the State Crime Records Bureau (SCRB).<sup>3</sup> In most cases, tenant-farmers are not considered farmers unless they possess property documents in their name, an agreement of tenancy, or are owners of an undivided property held collectively by the heirs (land under parents’ name). Thus, this method excludes the actual cultivator. These are the farmers (pure tenants) who are actually engaged in the production process. The share of tenant-farmers, who generally do not own land but are engaged in the process of cultivation, has increased in recent times. The NCRB’s previous reports on *Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India* contained data on suicides committed by farmers/cultivators only. Since 2015, it has divided the data into two broad categories i.e., who cultivate their own land and who cultivate on leased land. It is an official data source on tenant suicides committed across the states in India. Yet, there is no information on suicides committed by pure tenants from NCRB or SCRB reports. But this information should be available at the Mandal Revenue Office (MRO) and District Revenue Office (DRO).

As per the records of the SCRB (2018), the state of Telangana reported 1,825 farmer suicides between 2014 and 2017. This data pertains to farmers and not pure tenant-farmers. Between 2014 and September 2017, Nalgonda reported the highest number of suicides (52 cases or 18.3 per cent) in the state. Also, in the years 2014 and 2017, Nalgonda recorded some of the highest numbers of suicides: 69 and 130 cases, respectively. Given this, we consider Nalgonda an appropriate sample district for an in-depth investigation into farmer suicides in the state of Telangana. A similar line has been adopted for the selection of two mandals which witnessed higher farmer suicides, namely, Kanagal and Nalgonda rural. Further, eleven villages from the Nalgonda

mandal and five villages from the Kanagal mandal were selected. These villages have witnessed farmer suicides that were reported for the past four years (from 2014 to 2017) in both mandals.

For the study, we have selected all the farmers who committed suicide i.e. 39 victims across 16 villages in two mandal. The victims can be grouped into three broad categories of farmers: first, an *owner-cultivator* or a self-cultivator who cultivates his own land. Second, a *mixed tenant* who owns some land and also leases-in land. Third, a *pure tenant* who is landless and who leases in the land. The study broadly adopted two methods: the survey method, which was implemented through a structured questionnaire, and the non-survey method, which included case studies and information collected from the villages through focus group discussions (FGDs). Information collected for the study pertained to family characteristics, land ownership, leased-in land, and operated land, nature of crops, credit sources and tenant suicide issues. Information was also collected on the present state policy of Rythu Bandhu Scheme (RBS) and its impact on tenant farming. The core objective of the regression analysis is to find out the factors that induced the victim household's decision to leasing- in land for cultivation. From our FGD's, we found that lease in land is the main reason for suicides. In the regression analysis, our dependent variable is a lease in the land (measured in acres) and independent variables are -own land, caste, public provision of irrigation, education, age, family type, able worker and labour market certainty have explained the probability for the tenant household's decision to lease-in land.

#### *Selection of the Study Mandals*

Table 1 shows that eleven villages from Nalgonda and five from Kanagal were selected for this study, based on the list of reported suicide cases between 2014 and

TABLE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF SUICIDAL FARMERS' HOUSEHOLDS IN STUDY VILLAGES

District (1)	Mandal (2)	Village (3)	Suicide cases (4)	
Nalgonda	Nalgonda	Kanchanapally	2	
		Deepakunta	1	
		Panagal	2	
		Appajipeta	1	
		Khudavanpuram	1	
		Panagallu (Rural)	2	
		Buddaram	2	
		Dandempally	2	
		Mushampally	4	
		Kranthi Nagar, Peddabanda	2	
		Chandanapalli	5	
	Kanagal	Kanagal	Kanagal	2
			Regatte	6
			Parvathagiri	1
			Turkapally	3
			S. Lingotam	3
		Total	39	

Source: District Revenue Office, Nalgonda.

2017 provided by the Government of Telangana. In-depth interviews were conducted with the households of 39 victims spread across 16 villages from both the mandals.

V

#### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The formation of the new state of Telangana has not ended farmers' suicides, particularly the tenant-farmers who are more vulnerable. The tenancy has fast emerged, and there are about 5 lakh tenants in the state. Tenancy land accounts for 23 per cent of cultivable land in the state. Nalgonda is one of the districts which recorded the highest number of suicides based on the primary survey results.

Table 2 gives the details of suicides recorded in the Kanagal and Nalgonda mandals. A total of 39 suicides were reported from both the mandals. Nalgonda mandal reported the highest number of suicides (24 cases) with most of the victims being mixed tenants (58.33 per cent). In Kanagal mandal, too, most suicide victims (out of 15 reported cases) belonged to mixed tenant-farming households. However, in both the mandals, the lowest number of suicides was among owner- cultivator households (5 out of 39) compared to pure tenants (12 suicides out of 39). As per the State Crime Records Bureau Report, the cultivators who committed suicide from 2015 onwards have been classified into two categories: farmers and cultivators whose profession is farming, which includes those who cultivate on their land as well as those who cultivate on leased land or other people's land, but there is not a clear distinction made in the report between mixed and pure tenants. There is no information about suicides among pure tenants in the SCRBR. It shows the suicide rate is higher as a proportion of the total number of cultivators compared to the tenants. It is noted that 343 cultivators have committed suicide in the whole of Telangana state in 2020 and 303 in 2021. In the case of tenants who committed suicides reported a low of 123 in 2020 and 49 in 2021.

TABLE 2: DISTRIBUTION OF SUICIDES ACROSS HOUSEHOLDS OF FARMERS IN TWO MANDALS

Type of Farmers (1)	Kanagal (2)	Nalgonda (3)	Total (4)
Owner-cultivators	2	3	5
Mixed tenants	8	14	22
Pure tenants	5	7	12
Total	15	24	39

Source: Field survey.

#### (i) *Family Characteristics of Suicide Victims*

With the evidence of increasing suicides among the farmers in the district of Nalgonda, it is necessary to understand the socio-economic background of the victims to further analyse and understand the nature of suicides based on parameters like family size, type of family, caste, age and education.

Table 3 indicates that 34 out of the 39 farmers who died by suicide belonged to nuclear families. In Kanagal mandal, 11 out of 15 victims were from nuclear families, and in Nalgonda mandal, only one out of 24 victims were from a joint family. Another important factor to be noted is the average family size of victims: among the families of the farmers who committed suicide, the average size of the family was 3.54 people. Smaller family size is perceived to have a positive impact on the likelihood of dying by suicide. A cultivator's family is on average larger (4.20 persons) compared to that of a pure tenant (2.92 persons). Nevertheless, the lowest number of reported suicides was among owner-cultivators (12.8 per cent) who had families on average comprising 4.2 persons. The highest number of recorded suicides was among mixed tenants and pure tenants where the family size is smaller.

TABLE 3..DISTRIBUTION OF AVERAGE SIZE OF FAMILY, TYPE OF FAMILY, AGE, EDUCATION AND CASTE BY TYPE OF SUICIDE FARMERS

Type of Farmers (1)	Average size of family (2)	Type of family		Average age of victims (5)	Education		Caste		
		Nuclear (3)	Joint (4)		Illiterate (6)	Literate (7)	SC (8)	BC (9)	Others (10)
Owner-cultivators	4.20	4	1	39.20	5		1	4	
Mixed tenants	3.73	18	4	34.50	15	7	2	16	4
Pure tenants	2.92	12		34.83	12		3	9	
Total	3.54	34	5	35.21	32	7	6	29	4

Source: Field Survey.

The average age of the victims was higher (39.20) in owner-cultivators compared to mixed and pure tenants. Most of those who died by suicide were illiterate (32 out of 39); all pure tenants and cultivators who committed suicide were illiterate. Looking at the distribution of suicide cases across various social groups, out of 39 reported cases, 29 cases were from the BC community. Across both mandals, six suicide cases were from SCs. The OC community reported the least number of suicide cases: four. Among the farmers who committed suicide, most of them are tenants and their economic condition is not good.

(ii) *Average size of land operated by suicide victims*

The land-leasing decision could depend on the extent of land owned by the household. All are earning a major portion through cultivation. Tenants received the highest average annual income through cultivating leased-in land. The distribution of owned land, leased-in land and operated land by different types of farmers are provided in Table 4. It can be understood that owner-cultivators have the largest average own land (4.14) per cent compared with mixed tenants. It indicates that mixed tenants do not have sufficient land for cultivation. Therefore, they have leased-in land which is double the size (the average size of leased-in land is 5.86 acres) of the land they own.

TABLE 4: DISTRIBUTION OF OWN LAND AND LEASED-IN LAND, OPERATED LAND AND SOURCES OF IRRIGATION BY TYPE OF SUICIDE FARMERS (IN ACRES)

Type of Farmers (1)	Own Land (2)	Leased-in land (3)	Operated land (4)	Source of irrigation			Total (7)
				Open well (5)	Tube well (5)	Canal (6)	
Owner-cultivators	20.72 (4.14)	0 (0.00)	20.72 (4.14)	4.72 (1.68)	16 (5.69)	0 (0.00)	20.72 (7.37)
Mixed Tenants	65.12 (2.96)	128.9 (5.86)	194.02 (8.82)	27 (9.61)	81.96 (29.70)	85.06 (30.27)	194.02 (69.06)
Pure Tenants	0 (0.00)	66.22 (5.52)	66.22 (5.52)	6 (2.14)	31.6 (11.25)	28.62 (10.19)	66.22 (23.57)
Total	85.84 (2.20)	195.12 (5.00)	280.96 (7.20)	37.72 (13.43)	129.56 (46.11)	113.68 (40.46)	280.96 (100.00)

Source: Field survey.

Notes: Figures in parentheses are averages for own land, leased-in land and operated land. Figures in parentheses are percentages to total operated land for sources of irrigation.

They have household resources such as able persons, agricultural implements and animal power to drive agricultural operations. That is the main reason that they are able to lease-in land that is double the size of owned land. Mixed tenants also have the largest size of average operated land per household (8.82 acres) while pure tenants have the smallest size of land operated (5.52 acres). The evidence indicates that mixed and pure tenants are operating large-size lands by leasing-in land (195.12 acres leased-in land out of 280.96 acres of operated land). The dominant sources of irrigation are tube wells and canals. The private provision of irrigation is high compared with the public provision of irrigation (canal and tank) in the study area.

### (iii) Rural Labour Market Uncertainty

From five focus group discussions (FGDs), it was observed that some factors such as an absentee labour market surfaced, especially in the lean period across the dry villages of Nalgonda district. This meant that labour market exchanges were closed due to a lack of demand for labour, even though there was a huge surplus. Labourers were also vulnerable because of the lack of a wage market, which left them with no bargaining power to meet their subsistence needs. Given these conditions, a labourer's choices were limited to migrating from the village or looking for employment outside the village to meet his and his family's subsistence needs. Some agricultural labour entered the land-lease market as tenants. These lands can be easily leased from absentee landowners. Farmers who own their lands find agriculture to be non-remunerative and therefore are eager to lease-out their lands and shift to the non-agricultural sector to earn a better living. This indicates that the land-lease market is a big blow to the formation (and good performance) of the rural labour market.

Most of the suicide victims had no other livelihood sources in the village except for leasing-in land for cultivation. It is a known fact that there is fudging of numbers when it comes to farmer suicides in Telangana. The government counts a suicide by a farmer as a farmer's suicide only when the farmer is proven to have owned the land he

cultivated. Pure tenant farmers (without land ownership) who committed suicide were not reported as farmers. The absence of proper parameters to define a pure tenant as a farmer creates a barrier that prevents them from accessing government subsidies and other benefits. This has an adverse impact on pure tenant communities. The lack of documentary evidence of tenancy is particularly disadvantageous during critical situations such as crop failures due to natural calamities or a price crash.

(iv) *Forced Tenancy*

In a few case studies on pure tenants who committed suicide, the victims' families shed light on some major causes for suicide. Uncertainty of wage employment in the rural labour market induced them to lease-in land in the absence of any other alternatives in the village. It is a survival strategy to sustain in the village but it is not economically viable. Since, these households do not have enough capital to invest in agricultural production, depend on moneylenders or local traders at every stage of operation. If the yield or income from farming is not remunerative, the victims accumulated debts when they borrowed money from moneylenders and local traders to overcome their debt burden. The evidence indicates that they leased in land on fixed cash (the average rent per acre per year is Rs. 9000–11000). In case of crop failure, there was no risk sharing with the landowner, and they ended up with a huge rent burden—which pushed them into a deep financial crisis. All this meant that tenants were under severe psychological pressure, leading to indebtedness and resulting in suicide.

Table 5 shows that the predominant form of lease is fixed cash (31 tenants out of 34) in the study areas. It is evidenced that most of the tenants (31 out of 34) have an oral agreement with landowners and duration of the tenancy is yearly. It can be seen that cotton is the major crop. Most of the mixed and pure tenants cultivate cotton (more than 90 per cent of the total operated land). Under paddy cultivation, the lowest area is recorded by the tenants in both the mandals.

TABLE 5: DISTRIBUTION OF TERMS OF LEASE, AGREEMENT, DURATION, RENT AND CROP RAISED BY TYPE OF SUICIDE FARMERS

Type of farmers	Terms of Lease			Type of agreement		Duration of Tenancy		Average rent per acre (Rs.)	Total operated area by different crops (acres)		
	Fixed cash	Fixed kind	Total	Oral	Written	Total	Seasonally		Paddy	Cotton	Total
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Mixed Tenants	19	3	22	21	1	19	3	11000	18 (9.28)	176.02 (90.72)	194.02 (100)
Pure Tenants	12		12	10	2	8	4	9000	6 (9.06)	60.22 (90.93)	66.22 (100)
Total	31	3	34	31	3	27	7	10000	24 (9.22)	236.24 (90.78)	260.24 (100)

Source: Field survey.

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages to total operated land

(v) *Crop Failure*

Cotton is the major crop cultivated in the study villages in both the mandals in Nalgonda district. Both kinds of tenants (pure and mixed) cultivate cotton crop on leased-in land and have experienced crop failures in the last five years. Consequently, it is a huge burden to pay rent every year to the landowner. In the case of cultivators, only 5.71 per cent of cultivators grow cotton, which is the lowest among these two mandals. The major reported reason for crop loss is pest attacks. Most cases of pest attacks were reported by mixed tenants (90.72 per cent) and pure tenants (90.93 per cent) across both mandals. The lowest number of such cases was reported among the owner-cultivators (4.94 per cent) in Kanagal mandal. Among the farmers who reported drought as the reason for crop loss, most cases were reported by the mixed tenants and pure tenants in both the mandals; the least number of cases (8 per cent) were reported by the owner-cultivators of the Kanagal mandal. Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) aims at providing financial support to farmers who suffer crop loss or crop damage arising from unexpected incidents. Crop insurance is available to all farmers, including sharecroppers and tenant farmers, who grow the notified crops in the notified areas. However, only cultivators or tenants whose data is uploaded on the National Crop Insurance Portal shall be eligible for insurance coverage, and the premium subsidy from the state and central governments will be released accordingly. All tenants are required to submit necessary documentary evidence of land records prevailing in the state (Records of Right (RoR), Land Possession Certificate (LPC), etc.) and/or applicable contract or agreement details or other documents notified or permitted by the concerned state government in the case of sharecroppers or tenant farmers, and the same should be defined by the respective states in the notification itself. Nonetheless, all the tenants have failed to submit necessary documents due to non-cooperation by the landowners, and there is no proper official document that should identify a tenant farmer. In the case of pure tenants, they are unable to benefit from this scheme but land owner can claim the crop insurance from this scheme.

(vi) *Indebtedness*

Tenants borrowed loans for the purpose of making the initial investment required for agriculture at the beginning of the season and for fertiliser and pesticides in mid-crop season. They did not borrow for purchase of farm equipment or invest in irrigation, such as bore-wells. Most farmer loans were taken from moneylenders followed by relatives, friends and traders. Landlords or employers were the least-preferred sources of financial support. The pure tenants of Kanagal mandal on average took the highest loans, while the mixed tenant-farmers of the same mandal took the lowest loans. Examining this further, with regard to the loans taken from moneylenders, the pure tenants of the Kanagal mandal ranked the highest in terms of average loans (₹4,26,666) and while the mixed tenants took on the lowest (₹93,611).

Pure tenants borrowed loans from moneylenders. They did not get crop loans from banks and cooperative credit societies because they are landless and therefore not eligible. Tenants who took out loans from moneylenders at a 24 per cent interest rate are being raised due to the urgency. The length of the period varies depend on the circumstances, ranging from three months to a year period allowed for loan repayment. In the case of pure tenants, it can be seen that cotton is the major crop cultivated on leased-in land and has experienced crop failures in the last five years. As a result, it is a tremendous burden to pay rent on time and repay loans obtained from money lenders or commission agents. There is a written agreement showing that the tenant should repay the loan amount at the time of harvesting the crop. But there is no written agreement between the landowner and the tenant. There is clear evidence that failure to repay loans is a major causes of tenant suicides. Among those who borrowed from friends and relatives, the pure tenants of the Nalgonda mandal took on the highest loans, while the mixed tenants of the Kanagal mandal took on the lowest. Moreover, the only category that borrowed from their landowners was the mixed tenants of the Kanagal mandal. the tenant farmers have taken a loan with a written agreement from the moneylender. The interest rate and loan repayment deadline are clearly stated in the agreement. If he/she failed to repay the loan within the deadline, the indebted tenant farmer was threatened with violence and abuse in front of the villages. It is one of the major causes of tenant farmer suicide. In the case of failure to rent, the landowner (landowner relative) must be present at the time of harvest (selling the crop) to collect rent. One did not notice the tenant farmers being threatened with violence by the landowner in the study areas.

*(vii) Policies that Ignore and Exclude Pure Tenants*

Recent agricultural policies like the RBS exclude tenant farmers who are the actual cultivators facing risks from farming. RBS has been criticised for being pro-big farmers and absentee landowners and neglecting non-landowners and tenants. It is an expensive scheme compared with other schemes being implemented for the well-being and welfare of farmers in Telangana State. Indeed, there is no upper limit on the extent of land or landholdings to claim benefits under the scheme. There is a considerable amount of area (18 per cent) and operational holdings (20.1 per cent) under the tenancy system in Telangana, and such lands do not benefit from the RBS.

Fixed tenancy paid in cash is the predominant form of tenurial agreement in the study villages. Despite this, the present scheme ignores pure tenants, and mixed tenant-farmers get small amounts under the scheme, which is not sufficient even for an initial investment. In fact, tenant farmers depend heavily on moneylenders or commission agents; it is one of the major reasons for the debt crisis. The PM- KISAN (Prime Minister-Kisan Samman Nidhi) scheme is pro-small and marginal farmers but neglects pure tenants. These policies need to recognise and protect tenant farmers to prevent them from ending their lives.

(viii) *Regression Analysis Results*

For the purpose of analysis, the study has selected 39 suicide victim households. The aim is to determine the factors that induced the victim households to lease-in land for cultivation.

Table 6 results demonstrate that the extent of land ownership has a significant negative (coefficient -0.586) effect on the household's decision to lease-in land. Across social groups, some social groups are historically excluded from ownership of land and do not have enough land of their own. Consequently, the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Backward Castes (BCs) are two social groups that are significantly inclined towards leasing in land. While the Other Caste (OC) households have their own land and are mostly better off than others; as evident from the analysis, such social groups are negatively inclined to lease-in land.

TABLE 6: DETERMINANTS OF LEASING-IN LAND AMONG SUICIDE HOUSEHOLDS  
(DEMAND SIDE MODEL)

Variable (1)	Coefficient (2)	Standard Error (3)	p-value (4)
Own land	-0.586***	0.170	0.002
Scheduled Caste	0.454***	0.160	0.009
Backward Caste	1.406***	0.398	0.002
Other Caste	-0.296	0.553	0.596
Age	0.003	0.010	0.768
Illiterates	0.857**	0.380	0.033
Family Size	0.609	0.387	0.127
Public Provision of irrigation	0.331**	0.127	0.015
Able Workers	-0.108	0.168	0.525
Wage Employment Certainty	-1.181***	0.337	0.002
Constant	0.061	0.579	0.916
No. of observations	39		
R-squared	0.733		
Mean VIF	3.27		

*Source:* Authors' calculation. The variance inflation factor (VIF) is calculated to check the issues of multi collinearity in the estimated model. The results are reported in the above table.

Note: \*\*\* p<.01, \*\* p<.05, \* p<.1 and \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* denote 1, 5, and 10 per cent significance levels, respectively. In the above regression analysis the base category for caste is ST and the base category for education is literates but below secondary. Dependent variable is leasing-in land.

The results show that the victims' illiteracy has a significant positive (coefficient 0.857) effect on the household's decision to lease-in land. Similarly, the public provision of irrigation has a significant positive effect on the household's decision to lease-in land. Conversely, the greater the number of able workers in a household, the chances of the household leasing-in land declined. The results reveal that the wage employment certainty in the rural labour market has a significant negative (coefficient -1.181) effect on the household's decision to lease-in land. The landless rural poor should depend on the wage labour market exclusively. If they are facing wage employment uncertainty in the rural labour market, they would prefer other options within the village.

## VI

## CONCLUSION

This study has thrown light on the existence and nature of the rural labour market and also on emerging trends in land-lease markets in rural areas. The main challenge of the rural labour market is volatile employment opportunities. This is one of the main reasons for the development of the land-lease market in rural areas. More and more landowners are willing to lease-out their land because they see it as more profitable than cultivating it. In the case of landless labourers, there are no alternative sources of employment, apart from the land-lease market. This case study of Nalgonda district shows the burden of lease-in land cultivation on tenants. Out of the 39 reported suicide cases, 22 were farmers who were mixed tenants, and 12 were pure tenants. So, 34 out of the total 39 suicides were by tenant farmers. It is clear that tenancy cultivation is a burden for farmers—it is the primary reason for their suicides. Also, tenant landholdings do not encourage productive farming, resulting in a financial trap. In Telangana, tenants who committed suicide owned only small portions of land that were insufficient for good yields. In the case of pure tenants, their decision to lease-in land for cultivation due to employment uncertainty in the rural labour market was found to be the major reason for suicide. Recent policies in agriculture have been criticized for being pro-landowners (the policies are implemented based on land ownership) and for neglecting tenants (non-landowners) who cultivate leased-in land. The majority of suicide victims were tenant farmers who found it difficult to sustain themselves through farming but could also not find productive paid work in other employment sectors. The uncertainty of the agricultural sector is clearly evident when one considers stagnating productivity, rising costs of production, decelerating incomes, and large-scale unemployment, which has resulted in suicides among tenant farmers.

## VII

## THE WAY OUT AND POLICY CONCERNS

The findings of the study indicate that tenant farming is very fragile and the worst in it is the situation of pure tenant farmers. There is no proper documentary evidence on the number of tenants and the extent of land under the tenancy system at the village as well as mandal levels. It is very important to identify tenant farmers at village level. For this process, the village community needs to constitute a committee with members consisting of Panchayat Sarpanch (PS), Village Revenue Officer (VRO), Adarhsa Rythu (AR) and one-woman member from SHGs which should take the responsibility of enrolling the details of tenants and issue of certificates. It is a documented fact about the suicides committed by farmers in Telangana that 75 per cent of them belong to tenant farmers (Rythu Swarajya Vedika and TISS, 2018). They have taken the extreme step due to indebtedness (most of the credit is borrowed from informal sources like moneylenders and commission agents). Apart from this most of

the tenants have paid higher rent on land. However, the unaffordable machinery inputs make the tenant farmers difficult to get credit support from government sources (banks, cooperative societies, etc.) This makes them largely depend upon non-banking sources with high-interest rates for investments. In case of shocks in agriculture there is no support mechanism available to pure tenants. To curb this unrest situation in the tenant farming community both the central and state governments have come up with new policies on land lease. These measures are expected to benefit both the owner and the tenant farmer and create a congenial atmosphere in agricultural sector.

However, the Rythu Bandhu Scheme (RBS) has not benefitted the tenants (actual cultivators) as they do not own farm land. Similarly, the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) scheme, launched by the Central Government in 2018, which is pro-small and marginal farmers; however, it neglects pure tenants. Under this scheme, 92 per cent of poor peasants (small and marginal) have benefited. The study villages have good number of landless tenant farmers and the scheme ignores them completely. Among the absentee land owners there are a considerable number of government employers. They all are reaping the scheme benefits. Therefore, the study suggests that the benefits which are useful in the long-run should be provided to the actual cultivators rather than to the absentee land owners. RBS is supposed to help farmers in reducing their dependence on informal credit but it has been criticized for being pro-landowners (RBS is implemented based on land ownership) and neglecting tenants (non-landowners) who cultivate leased-in land. The majority of suicide victims are tenant farmers who find it difficult to sustain themselves through farming and could not find productive paid work in other employment sectors (NIRD&PR, 2020). The scheme also does not extend benefits to tenant farmers. The uncertainty of the agricultural sector is clearly evident when one considers stagnating productivity, rising costs of production, decelerating incomes, and large-scale unemployment, which have caused suicides among tenant farmers. The suggested policy measures, if implemented, could bring a change in the situation of farmers in general and tenant farmers in particular in the state.

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#### NOTES

1. The State Crime Records Bureau (SCRB) reported that between 2014 and 2017, around 1,825 farmers belonging to the mixed-tenant and small-farmer categories died by suicide in the state of Telangana. It must be mentioned that this figure does not include landless labourers (pure tenants) who lease-in land, as they were not categorized as farmers in the records of the SCRB.

2. Another study conducted by Vasavi (1999) provides data from five Indian states—Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra and Punjab—on farmer suicides from 1998 to 2006. In this period, a majority of suicides involved marginal cultivators with less than 1 hectare of land, and small cultivators who had between 1 and 2 hectares.

3. Since the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) does not have its own data collection machinery, it only collates and tabulates the data received from the SCRBs on unnatural deaths. Further, he suggests that on this issue there should be cooperation and coordination among the government departments. It is the duty of revenue officials (tehsildar) to identify the suicides by farmers, since it is their department which deals with land records (<http://psainath.org/the-slaughter-of-suicide-data/>).

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