

Now, a farm suicide story from Punjab

Widows and children of farmers come to Delhi, knocking at government's door

Gargi Parsai

NEW DELHI: Twelve families, mostly children and widows, of indebted farmers who committed suicide in Punjab, a prosperous agricultural State, are here to knock at the doors of the Centre.

On Thursday, the children will be joined by several others here in a solidarity march. They will wear T-shirts with the message, "Every farmer counts. Every child dreams."

The children had to give up their studies and are struggling to keep the local moneylender at bay. "Nothing can be done for you" is the common refrain they have been hearing from the local administration for years, even as the loans their farmer-fathers took multiply with huge interest.

One farmer's wife burnt herself to death rather than face the ignominy of having the *artiya* (moneylender) on her doorstep every week.

Tears welled up in his eyes as 16-year-old Dharmendra from Chotia village recounted the death of his father, who

consumed pesticide.

Dharmendra has three siblings and mother to take care of. His father sold off his land and cleared part of the debt. The family still owes Rs. 4 lakh-5 lakh to the local moneylender as well as some relatives. Last year this 10th Class student gave up his studies, though he loves to pursue education, and became a daily wager. "We want *karza-maafi* [loan waiver]," he said.

Paramjeet Kaur, a mother of three children, became a widow at the age of 28. "Unable to face the harassment for return of a loan, my husband consumed spray and took his own life." Of the three children, the eldest daughter has continued her studies by taking up tailoring. Paramjeet herself is a daily wager and she even does household chores for neighbours. She wants *karza-maafi* and free education for her children. "Education is free for Dalits, but not for us Jats," she said.

Naresh Khan, 18, lost his mother who doused herself



HAUNTED BY DEBT BURDEN: *Paramjeet Kaur (right) with her children. Unable to face harassment from moneylenders her farmer-husband killed himself in Punjab.*

with kerosene and set herself afire. "The loan keeps increasing because of high interest."

Seventy-year-old Chameeli's farmer-son committed suicide not being able to return a loan of Rs. 1.5 lakh. Now Chameeli, along with her daughter-in-law, works as a

daily wager. "There are so many of us in the same boat; nobody is able to help anyone in Punjab," she said.

Surprisingly, none of them has heard of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

U.S.-based Harpreet Kaur of Sach Productions said ac-

tivists came upon several families in Sangrur district, where the farmers had committed suicide.

"Universal statement"

"We are highlighting the issue of farmers' suicide and making a universal statement. These families are humiliated. They feel stressed out and start trembling when the moneylender comes, threatening to take away their land or homes. In our research, we have focussed on mothers and children, especially children because they suffer most."

Harpreet said this was the first time the children and women had come out of Punjab. "We hope our efforts, with the help of local NGOs, Lokraj and Navdanya, can help them get pension and that people will come forward to adopt these families."

On Thursday, the victims of farmers' indebtedness will meet Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar. They are also trying to seek an appointment with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.