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LIVELIHOOD VULNERABILITY, COVID-19 AND SUICIDE AMONG DAILY WAGE WORKERS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT
Daily wage workers in India constitute one of the most economically and socially vulnerable segments of the workforce, largely employed within the informal sector and dependent on unstable, day-to-day earnings for their livelihood. Daily wage earners remained the largest profession-wise group among suicide victims in India. *The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 drastically heightened livelihood vulnerability among India's daily wage workers, primarily through abrupt lockdowns that triggered massive job losses and income collapse. This study analyses the livelihood vulnerability, the COVID-19 crisis, and the incidence of suicide among daily wage workers in India. Drawing upon secondary data from National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) statistics and existing literature, the paper highlights a marked increase in suicides among daily wage earners, who represents the largest proportion of total suicides when compared to other professional groups. Additionally, the crisis related to the Covid pandemic has profoundly affected the lives and livelihoods of daily wage earners. The study suggests that there is an urgent need for more inclusive, comprehensive social protection measures to ensure employment security by the government to reduce livelihood vulnerability and prevent suicide among daily wage workers.*
KEYWORDS: *Daily wage workers, Livelihood vulnerability, Covid-19, Suicide, India.*

INTRODUCTION

Daily wage earners remained the largest profession-wise group among suicide victims in India. According to data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), suicide claimed more lives in India in 2020 than COVID-19. In 2020, the nation recorded 1.53 lakh suicide deaths, while nearly 1.50 lakh people died from fatal complications related to the Covid pandemic. Daily wage earners committed the highest number of suicides (37,666) out of the total suicide incidences (1,53,052). This category's percentage of all suicides rose from 12% in 2014 to 24.6% in 2020. The majority of suicide victims were among the nation's poorest citizens. Daily wage workers accounted for 17.8% of suicide victims in 2015, 19.2% in 2016, 22.1% in 2017, 22.4% in 2018, and 23.4% in 2019. This percentage has been steadily rising since 2014 (NCRB, 2021). Despite the continuous rise in suicides among daily wage workers since 2014, this issue has not received significant attention in policy discussions or academic discourse. The trend of suicides among daily wage earners highlights the neglect faced by this community from the government. Daily wage earners represent the lowest income group in India, relying on daily earnings to support themselves and their families.

Daily wage earners are individuals who receive payment on a daily basis or from various employers for services performed or work completed. These workers are often referred to as contract workers, day laborers, casual workers, or seasonal workers. Individuals engaged in activities such as construction, domestic work, dry cleaning, rag picking, playing traditional music, cooking, hairdressing (barbering), cleaning utensils at tea stalls and small food outlets, tailoring, beauty services, plumbing, painting, bricklaying, street vending, operating machinery, and weightlifting at train stations and markets, fall under the category of daily wage workers. Such workers typically do not have fixed working hours or stable wages, and they earn income to sustain their households through daily and temporary employment, often at low pay.

RESEARCH GAP AND OBJECTIVES

Extensive research exists on farmer suicides at both macro and micro levels; however, there remains a lack of studies, analyses, or discussions regarding suicides among daily wage earners. Even though there are

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continuously more incidences of committing suicide by daily wage earners than that of farm suicide, in terms of absolute numbers, the daily wage earners category is the largest share of total suicides. In just seven years, the percentage of daily wage earners who commit suicide has doubled from 12% to 24.6% (2014-2020). Researchers, academics, development organizations, and policy makers have all overlooked the problem of wage earners committing suicide. Therefore, the present paper seeks to address this research gap by exploring the problem of suicide among wage earners. The objectives of this paper are (i) to analyse the trends in suicide among wage earners and (ii) to review the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the livelihood of daily wage earners. For the present study, data has been used from secondary sources such as NCRB reports, articles, and newspapers.

TRENDS IN SUICIDE AMONG DAILY WAGERS

The NCRB report categorizes suicides into nine distinct professional groups: housewives and individuals engaged in the agricultural sector (farmers and agricultural laborers), professionals and salaried employees (from both government and private sectors), students, unemployed individuals, self-employed persons (including vendors, tradesmen, and other self-employed individuals), daily wage workers, retired individuals, and a category labeled 'others'. The NCRB began to classify daily wage workers in its 'Accidental Deaths & Suicides in India (ADSI)' data starting in 2014. The distribution of suicide cases in India by profession from 2014 to 2020 is illustrated in Table-1. Between 2014 and 2020, 1.94 lakh daily wage earners committed suicide, making up the largest percentage (20.34 percent) of all suicides (9.53 lakh cases). The proportion of daily wage earners among those who died by suicide has increased significantly from 2014 to 2020. In 2014, daily wage earners accounted for 15,735 cases (12% of total suicides), which rose to 37,666 cases (24.6% of total suicides) by 2020. This trend clearly indicates a consistent rise in the share of daily wage earners among suicide victims. In 2020, daily wage earners represented nearly a quarter of all suicides, with 37,666 out of a total of 1,53,052 suicide cases. Between 2014 and 2020, a total of 1,93,795 daily wage earners committed suicide, followed by other individuals (1,83,209), housewives (1,52,127), self-employed individuals (1,11,964), unemployed individuals (86,851), and professionals/salaried persons (81,785). Regarding farmer suicides, a total of 78,303 individuals involved in the agricultural sector died by suicide from 2014 to 2020.

The professional/salaried persons group saw a 16.5% increase in suicides, from 12,725 in 2019 to 14,825 in 2020, and a slight increase in their share, from 9.1% to 9.7%. Suicides among the unemployed population increased by 11.65 percent (from 14,019 in 2019 to 15,562 in 2020), and their percentage increased marginally to 10.2 percent from 10.1 percent in 2019, staying in double digits for the second year in a row.

Table 1: Profession-wise distribution of Suicides in India (2014-2020)

Sl No	Profession	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
1	House wife	20148	22293	21563	21453	22937	21359	22374	152127 (15.97)
2	Professionals/Salaried persons	9807	10571	10343	11539	11975	12725	14825	81785 (8.58)
3	Students	8068	8934	9478	9905	10159	10335	12526	69405 (7.28)
4	Unemployed persons	9918	10912	11173	12241	12936	14019	15652	86851 (9.11)
5	Self-employed persons	25904	12185	13507	13789	13149	16098	17332	111964 (11.75)
6	Persons engaged in farming Sector	12360	12602	11379	10655	10349	10281	10677	78303 (8.22)
7	Daily wage earners	15735	23799	25164	28741	30127	32563	37666	193795 (20.34)
8	Retired persons	870	1015	1039	999	1114	1302	1457	7796 (0.84)
9	Other persons	41216	31312	27362	20565	21770	20441	20543	183209 (19.23)
	Total	131666	133623	131008	129887	134516	139123	153052	952875 (100)

Source: Data compiled from various reports of ADSI.
Note: Data in the brackets are percentages to total.

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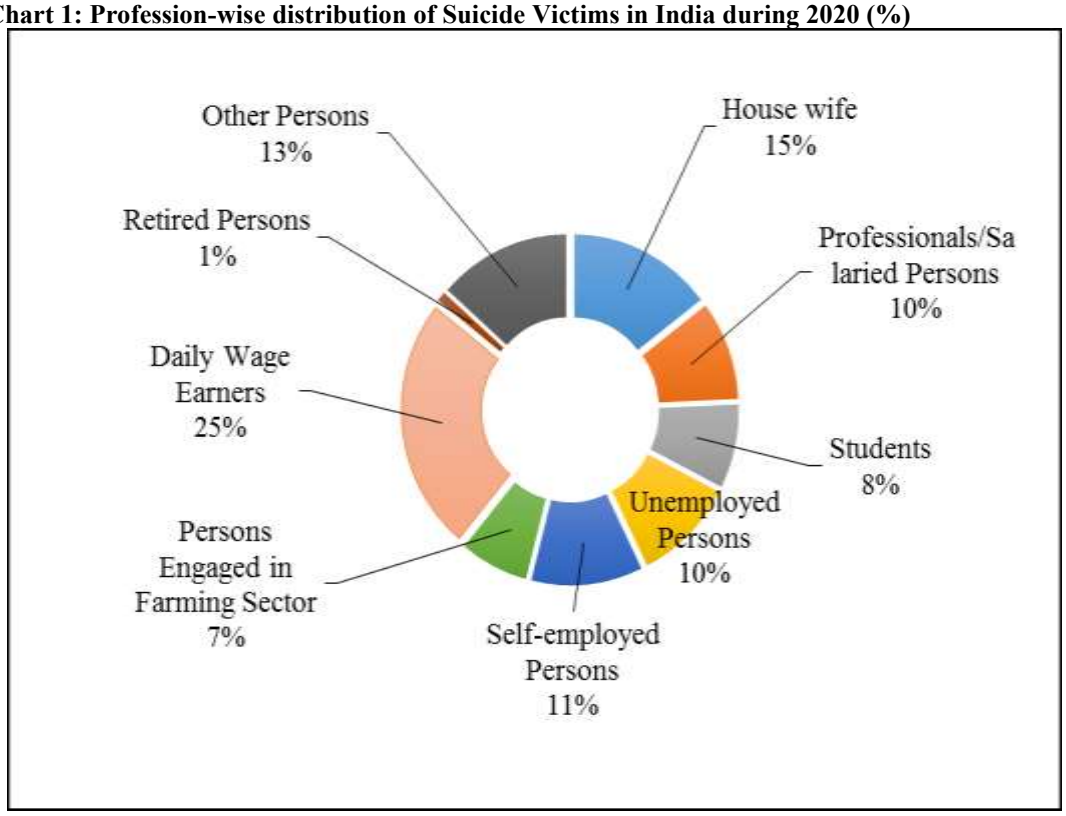
According to the ADSI sub-section of the NCRB data (2020), an analysis based on the occupational status of the victims indicates that daily-wagers represent the highest percentage. A sudden nationwide lockdown with four hours' notice, which resulted in daily wage workers—many of whom are migrants—struggling to return home and subsequently earn an income, daily wage earners constituted the largest proportion of individuals who died by suicide in the country in 2020, accounting for 25 percent of all suicide victims (Chart-1). House wives represented the second largest group among suicide deaths, comprising 15 percent of the total in 2020. Following house wives, the percentage share of total deaths by suicide by occupation was as follows: 'self-employed persons' (11%), 'professional/salaried persons' (10%), 'farmers/cultivators' (7%), and 'retired persons' (1%). The 'other' category accounted for 13% of all suicides.

Chart 1: Profession-wise distribution of Suicide Victims in India during 2020 (%)



Source: NCRB (2021).

The proportionate of daily wage earners in the total suicides from 2014 to 2020 is dipicted in Table-2. In 2014, daily wage earners accounted for 12 percent of all suicides, a figure that steadily increased to 24.61 percent by 2020. The incidence of suicide among daily wage earners is escalating. In 2019, the figure stood at almost 23.41 per cent or 32, 563 daily wage earners who died by suicide, whereas in 2018 the share was 22.4 per cent (30,127), in 2017 it was 22.1 per cent (28,741), while in 2016 it was 19.2 per cent (25, 164). The rise in suicides among daily wage workers is consistently outpacing the overall increase in suicides. The Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) indicates that suicides among daily wage workers grew at a significantly higher annual rate of 15.65%, in contrast to the total suicide rate of 2.54% (refer to Table 2). This trend highlights a disproportionate rise in suicides among daily wage workers during this period. Daily wage workers are becoming increasingly susceptible, with suicide rates climbing at a much more rapid rate than that of the general population. The expanding disparity points to a growing economic and employment vulnerability faced by wage workers.

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Table 2: Share of Daily Wage workers in the Total Suicides in India

Year	Total Suicides	No. of suicide daily wage workers	% share of wage workers
2014	131666	15735	11.95
2015	133623	23799	17.81
2016	131008	25164	19.21
2017	129887	28741	22.13
2018	134516	30127	22.40
2019	139123	32563	23.41
2020	153052	37666	24.61
Total	**952875**	**193795**	**20.34**
CAGR (2014-2020)	**2.55%**	**15.67%**	

Source: Data compiled from various reports of ADSI.

LOSS OF LIVELIHOOD DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The Covid-19 pandemic has severely affected the workers who depend on daily wages to survive and support their families. Since the onset of the Covid-19 lockdown, there has been a significant shortage of job opportunities in labor markets. Unlike other employees, work-from-home arrangements are not feasible for daily wage earners. During first lockdown of Covid-19 pandemic, few daily wage earners survived because residents, developmental organisations, government agencies and others helped by distributing free food kits. The second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic has made it worse for them as daily wage labourers have been pushed beyond their capacity to stay afloat in the pandemic. The report titled 'State of Working India 2021 – One Year of Covid-19' by Azim Premji University reveals that approximately 230 million individuals across India fell below the national minimum wage threshold of Rs 375 per day, as recommended by the Anoop Satpathy committee. Furthermore, the report indicates that daily wage workers are more vulnerable to job loss, affecting both men and women (Azim Premji University, 2021). Daily wage earners represent the most vulnerable and socially marginalized community in India, facing challenges such as job loss, lack of shelter, loss of identity, and geographic displacement due to Covid (Shahare, 2020). The daily wagers were the worst sufferers of Covid pandemic, not only were they without jobs but also were disappointed because of the cessation of their daily income on which they survived (Bhagat et al, 2020).

The nationwide lockdown in 2020 was a massive shock to the livelihoods and wage earnings of the poor. A survey conducted by The Hindu in mid-April 2020 regarding the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on migrant workers indicated that 90% of these individuals did not receive their wages across various states, 96% were unable to procure rations from government outlets, and 70% lacked access to cooked meals during the initial lockdown phase (The Hindu, 2020). Afridi et al. (2020) conducted a survey involving 1387 households across five districts in Delhi, which found that 45 percent of daily wage laborers in the informal sector suffered a loss of livelihood. Vyas (2021), referencing the Consumer Pyramids Household Survey report by CMIE, noted that "of the total 2.23 crore jobs lost during April-May 2021, 1.72 crore were held by daily wage earners." In a comprehensive three-month field study conducted by Mohan et al. (2021) on daily wage workers in the mazdoor mandis of Lucknow and Pune, the findings indicated a significant decline in their work and living conditions following the lockdown, attributed to a scarcity of employment opportunities. The survey results demonstrated that the monthly earnings of daily wage laborers decreased by approximately 50-64 percent from pre-lockdown to post-lockdown (Mohan et al., 2021). This evidence clearly illustrates that the impact of Covid-19 was profoundly detrimental to daily wage workers.

WHY ARE DAILY WAGE WORKERS COMMITTING SUICIDE?

There has been a steady rise in the proportion of daily wage workers who are committing suicides, among all occupational groups. This is confirmed from the data of NCRB that the proportion of daily wage workers, an already vulnerable group economically, committing suicide has risen over the years. Between 2014 and 2020, suicides by daily wage earners rose to 37,666 from 15,735, an increase of 139%. In India, daily wage earners were the largest professional group who died by suicide. It is much more difficult to establish the factors associated with the suicide among daily wage earners. The daily wage workers who depend on daily earnings

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for their everyday livelihood are among the worst hit by Covid-19 crisis. As per the NCRB report (2021), there were 37,666 daily wage earners committed suicide in India during the pandemic hit, an increase of 16 per cent over 2019. Loss of livelihood and struggle for survival (uncertainty) during Covid pandemic is also become one of the factors that force wage workers to commit suicide and it cannot be neglected.

There exists an inverse correlation between economic status and the incidence of suicide among individuals. As economic status increases, the likelihood of a person committing suicide decreases. This is substantiated by data from the NCRB, which indicates that in 2020, 64 percent of suicide victims in India had an income of less than Rs 1 lakh per annum. This group predominantly includes daily wage earners. These workers were significantly affected by the Covid-19 lockdown. During this period, the challenges faced by daily wage earners were extensively covered by the media and newspapers. They not only lost their income sources in urban areas but also encountered difficulties in supporting their families back home. Since the initial phase of lockdowns in India, daily wage earners have been among the most severely impacted by the pandemic. Following the central government's announcement of a nationwide lockdown and the restrictions placed on economic activities, a vast majority of daily wage earners found themselves unemployed. These workers, who are primarily migrants, faced immense challenges in sustaining themselves and assisting their families. The closure of major industries left them without any income, complicating their ability to afford essential services. At that time, these circumstances represented one of the most severe crises for daily wage earners in the history of the nation. Even after the lockdown was lifted, daily wage earners encountered a reduced demand for their services. The absence of government support for individuals employed in the unorganised sector exacerbated the livelihood challenges faced by daily wage earners, who struggled to provide for their families.

CONCLUSSIONS AND WAY FORWARD

It is evident from the pertinent secondary data that the category of daily wage earners represents the largest proportion of total suicides when compared to other professional groups. Additionally, the crisis related to the Covid pandemic has profoundly affected the lives and livelihoods of daily wage earners. This group constitutes the lowest-earning population segment in India. They have been left without any means to sustain themselves. It is evident from the pertinent secondary data that the category of daily wage earners represents the largest proportion of total suicides when compared to other professional groups. Additionally, the crisis related to the Covid pandemic has profoundly affected the lives and livelihoods of daily wage earners. This group constitutes the lowest-earning population segment in India. They have been left without any means to sustain themselves. The repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic have particularly devastated daily wage workers, resulting in the loss of employment and daily income. In addition to losing their means of livelihood, they have descended into severe poverty and deprivation. Therefore, the government agencies need to create a guarantee of job opportunities or small business for them to restart their livelihoods.

During the pandemic crisis, various newspapers and TV channels reported that the majority of daily wage workers were unable to access government relief packages due to either inadequate relief or lack of identity proof. Further, there is no proper national or regional level registry for the daily wage workers who engaged in informal jobs or sectors such as street vendors, construction workers, rickshaw pullers, auto-rickshaw drivers and temporary staff, etc. Consequently, there is an immediate necessity to establish and digitize these registries for the benefit of daily wage earners. Daily wage earners face significant challenges, as they often lack savings or support systems to sustain themselves during difficult times or crises. Therefore, the government has to ensure the livelihood of the wage earners by making the social security architecture more inclusive and effective.

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