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Those Who Did Not Die

Impact of the Agrarian Crisis on Women in Punjab

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Introduction

Why I Wrote This Book

We are learning to live in the midst of many harsh realities, each unique in its own way, of untold human suffering and indignity. Perhaps the most bizarre is how this country's food producers are seeking pesticides or the noose to end their own lives. They are the producers of the food we daily consume. Agriculture continues to be our most basic source of sustenance even if buying what we require from the closest shop in a hectic metropolis is the closest some of us come to agriculture. Our alienation from wheat and paddy fields and the invisibility of the hard-working peasantry are both finally ending, however, as watching TV news over a plate of food is no longer easy in today's times. News headlines flash suicides from the Vidharbha region of Maharashtra, and from many other states, from Kerala to Punjab. One need not be an economist or a sociologist to understand the contemporary crisis in agriculture; one just has to be human, as nothing connects us more to life than food. Whose toil has gone into the rice and rotis we eat—is the farmer who grew these cereals still alive? And if the person who grew this food is fighting a tough battle between life and death, there is something seriously amiss.

To know more about this formidable reality, I had to take a few steps closer to the murky side of agriculture. The single question that haunted me to the point of distraction was the aftermath of a suicide: how were women coping with the tragic circumstances and, more importantly, meeting their own needs and those of their families? There's no dearth of literature on the agrarian crisis in general and peasant suicides in particular. However, there's no way we get to know about how women—who are an active part of the peasantry—experience the crisis. This study is an attempt to break a culture of silence by engaging in dialogue with the person concerned about the surrounding reality as seen and experienced by her in the aftermath of a suicide. There is a vexed ambiguity at work throughout. Whether

one is trying to make women more visible and to bring their voices into the public arena so as to make the picture of the devastating agrarian crisis more complete, or whether—more significantly—one is able to glimpse a way forward for women in the midst of the systemic injustice and deepening crisis in this predominantly poor and rural country. These questions, findings and observations that the book brings will, hopefully, add to the body of literature and research on the agrarian crisis as well as on peasant struggles in the Punjab and elsewhere.

The spate of suicides by small and marginal farmers in several states of India reflects the crisis in Indian agriculture, unprecedented in post independence India. The quarter million¹ suicides recorded so far call serious attention to the reality of lakhs more of the peasantry, especially agricultural labourers, on the brink of devastation in this country. The suicides of agricultural labourers continue to go unreported in almost all studies or news reports on peasant suicides. In Punjab, for instance, of a total of 2890 suicides in the two districts of Bhatinda and Sangrur, 61% were farmers and 39% were agricultural labourers.² This phenomenon is largely seen as an outcome of policy failures related to agriculture, particularly in the post liberalization period. However, studies on Punjab, for example, suggest the need to understand the wider context of social changes taking place in rural Punjab in the past four decades. Studies on peasant suicides and indebtedness continue to render invisible the family and the household, with the agricultural labourer or farmer viewed solely as a producer of food selling his or her labour or produce. Yet a peasant—male or female—does not enter debt for the sake of agricultural inputs alone. Those dependent on agriculture depend on it to fulfil several needs even as they produce food for society at large—food for their own families, education or jobs for their children, marriage expenses, health care, along with dreams of a more dignified life for their near and dear ones. The working class and the peasantry hold on to their dreams with tenacity, even when these dreams seem to remain unfulfilled. The stakes in the sweeping economic changes are becoming heavy; therefore, the need to remain close to their aspirations more urgent, even if arduous—for in the interim the rising cost of agricultural inputs, volatile market prices, increasing debt, unforeseen weather conditions, failed crops, spurious seeds and a range of other factors take their toll.



Inputs into agriculture far outweigh the income generated from agriculture. Being perceived as the head of the patriarchal family—as a father, son or brother—the male farmer is under tremendous pressure to make ends meet and fulfil all other responsibilities. When he is unable to perform the role of provider or *karamdata*, unable to look after everyone's needs, a sense of futility keeps building up inside, which his already injured masculine pride prevents him from expressing or sharing with family members. The reasons for suicide become blurred as several factors overlap, and any one event can be a trigger point—low self-esteem, hurt pride, humiliation by recovery agents and *arhtiyas* all contribute. There is the torment of seeing one's children not having enough to eat, or facing one's inability to pay their school fees. The failure of crops or little or no payment from sale of crops as pending loans are cancelled against it often become the final straw. The land may have to be sold for payment of debts. Such a decision implies ignominy and defeat as family land in this country is so tied up to the identity of one's family and ancestors. Women are, more often than not, shielded from these events. Often, it is only in the aftermath of a suicide that the father-in-law or a panchayat member or the *arhtiya* himself reveals the debts to the wife.

These gendered spaces—between the public and the private—are costly and tragic. It is this false dichotomy between the social and economic or family and work that continues to inform perceptions, attitudes, policies, development programs and hence resource allocations. The ideological underpinnings of this dichotomy make things far too severe for women, especially those surviving the impact of suicides. From the microcosm of a specific suicide case to a larger view of society, the silences emanating from our structured realities are most damaging. The invisibility of women's labour and the negation of contribution in sustaining the livelihoods of the household are as serious in the long-lived consequences as the distressed male farmer's silence regarding the life-and-death turmoil he is undergoing. As these farmers die, do they damn the entire system that compels their exit? Their cries and longing for life simply signal attention to the plight of millions more of the peasantry that are surviving against all odds today in our society. Is resorting to suicide then an act of resistance in the face of increased exploitation of the peasantry? Or defeat at the hands of a murderous society and its institutions and cultural practices?

Primarily, the intent of this book is to draw political and humanitarian attention to the aftermath of peasant suicides, particularly the coping strategies of women who are already marginalized in a deeply traditional and patriarchal society. As an urgent political task, I attempt to make the picture that meets the eye more complete. Women's voices, and some broad data from the overall analysis, will speak to readers of the crisis from my precise point of entry into this region and the endless saga of its toiling class. *Secondly*, the dead end that widowhood signifies in this feudal-patriarchal society needs to be interrogated—especially, in this context, through the instances of widows running fatherless families. The growing number of “widows” in the Punjab is determined by processes that demand our attention—be it the political economy or cultural practices. What do these women have to say about their changed circumstances? Can we shift the lens to view the woman as survivor, even as she holds on to the fragile threads of existence despite colossal losses? More fervently than ever she holds on to her dreams of a future for herself and her children. What colour or hue will this future be, what shape? *Finally*, the impetus to begin documenting lives in this agrarian milieu came from a deep need to understand the deep distress and the fragmentation of the individual self in poverty experienced by the peasant community, especially after having toiled hard to make Punjab the bread basket of the country. The subjective reality of dispossession and the related psychological stress for entire communities need to be documented to reveal the extent of destruction capitalism brings in its pursuit.

Perhaps the shocking figure of 77% Indians living on less than ₹ 20 per day makes for a truth not easy to bear.³ Perhaps empathy is a less difficult response than defeat for those of us who seek to build a different society. Perhaps persistent questioning has certain tenacity, and it was this that helped in finally taking me closer to a reality that is only a few hours away from the national capital in a geographical and spatial sense.

Why Look into the Punjab

Living in Delhi, it was the proximity to Punjab that helped me decide that I did not have to go to the Vidharbha region when suicides were

happening just six hours away. Many assumptions about the cradle of the Green Revolution along with its image of prosperity were being overturned or questioned in recent years. A close interaction with the state-created widows of Punjab in the aftermath of the anti-Sikh genocide of 1984—during which over 3,000 Sikhs were estimated to have been killed and thousands more rendered homeless with the complicity of the Indian state—had been a turning point in our student years in Delhi. Barely had we been able to absorb the enormity of the nationalist question in Punjab and the violence that carried on till the early 90s when, in an international seminar held in Delhi 1996, there was a presentation linking Punjab's agrarian crisis to the question of Sikh nationhood and the fight for a separate Khalistan that was deeply critical of both.⁴ Looking back, it was possible to trace the widespread unrest among the peasantry, youth, teachers' unions, in the years preceding Operation Bluestar. The deep rift between centre-state relations, and the emergence of the Akali Dal and its boosting of religious identity, had affected the work of many left democratic sections among the youth and peasantry. The model of the Green Revolution⁵ obviously had not escaped the tentacles of the acute agrarian crisis that was spreading across the country; at this crucial point, state repression also grew in an unimaginable manner. The discontent simmering among the peasantry, especially agricultural labourers, spilled out in large contingents as kisan rallies reached Delhi's Boat Club area. Turban-clad farmers from the Punjab stood out in the *melée*, making one wonder. It was evident that the grinning Jat Sikh farmer symbolizing agricultural prosperity on calendar art was in revolt. The boast of a prosperous Punjab with its highest-in-the country per capita income was clearly just part of the Green Revolution propaganda.

Perhaps the exposure to working class families during the intense phase of factory closures and forced evictions in the national capital from 1996 onwards, and to the way in which women coped in the aftermath, had already become the beginning of a search. My feminist convictions were taking me closer to understanding both the coping strategies of women in the face of changed realities as well as the impact of the policies of the neoliberal regime that was, and is, precipitating the dispossession of vast sections of the populace. With closer exposure to anti-displacement and anti-mining struggles in Orissa and elsewhere, one's sheer inability to look more closely

at the situation of women in these regions became more frustrating. I have to confess that with jobs, livelihoods, natural resources, dwelling places and identity all at stake, it was often almost impossible to look at how women were differently impacted, despite all of one's feminist training and rigour. Caught between activism and reading, the search for critical reflection had begun a clamour within that was hard to quieten. This reality could never be easily bridged with the intellectual climate in which one had to contend with the postmodernist assertions that were ceaselessly deconstructing all identities in writings, seminars and conferences. Passively, then, we were living through a general bewilderment as many actually queried who the ordinary woman was—*aam aurat hai kaun?*

Many trees have since been felled in the cause of arguing that there is no such thing as "ordinary" and no generic "woman". Many women of privilege have passionately critiqued such generalizations by subjecting the "ordinary woman" to many extraordinary critiques. And yet, my sense that we were losing feminist ground in the context of current realities filled me with a persistent, nagging confusion. An occasional article by feminist writers on assessing the relevance of socialist feminism in today's context gave rise to some insights and further questions. Finally, in the midst of a public meeting on peasant suicides held by PUDR in 2004,⁶ something got resolved. I decided to go to Punjab and meet women who were surviving the impact of peasant suicides. I felt certain that by doing so I would at least be able to give a name or a face to the confusion that had come to live with me every waking hour. Going to Punjab to meet women in families that had seen peasant suicides was one way of directly acquainting myself with the efforts of women in dealing with the calamities wreaked by intensifying economic distress. There was no other way, no shortcut to understanding—from women's point of view, specifically—the outcome of agricultural policies and their toll on the peasantry.

The debate characterizing the Indian economy has its own variations and specificities among peasant organizations in Punjab. Even as it grapples with the current agrarian crisis, the debate, with its rich and long history, is determining joint alliances and strategies today as it has in the past. Discussions on women's participation in agricultural labour and household labour in an agrarian society continue, however, to remain neglected. Entering this neglected area to look at women's situation with the active support of different

peasant unions posed fewer problems. Since it was happening within the shared context of the overall agrarian crisis, examining existing power structures posed no problems. I was also goaded by my own concern, bordering on paranoia, about what was happening with women in the broader context of the systemic assault on people's land, forests, labour and other resources by a state that had abdicated even the pretence of the welfare rhetoric that was common in the early decades after independence.

Between action and writing, I took recourse to writing as it was a search that would clear many cobwebs for me in trying to understand the status of women in today's context. At no point since independence have women had more at stake than the women of the peasantry and the working class today. And at no point in history has so much been written on women, or publishers striven so hard to add titles or include imprints on women's oppression to their catalogues. Against this backdrop, I too am set to consume a few more reams of paper, even if only to assert that something significant continues to elude us.

Let us first have a quick look at the profile of the women who speak in the chapters of this book.

Who Are the Women Interviewed

The interviews were consciously confined to the wives, mothers and in rare cases other female relatives to gauge specifically women's accounts and perceptions of the hardships and challenges. Majority of the respondents contacted were spouse of the deceased. Out of 136 respondents 92 (67.6%) were spouse of the deceased, followed by mother (20.6%).

In the absence of the wife or the mother, some other woman relative of the deceased has been interviewed. This happened if the wife had gone out on work or to a relative's place, or in a few cases, had left the in-laws after the suicide or in even fewer cases, when the wife is also not alive. In some cases, there is more than one suicide in the family and in some others both the wife and the mother speak. For purposes of quantifying data, the person most active in the conversation has been recorded as respondent while the discussions and statements as well as silences of the others has been incorporated

into the overall analysis based on observations and perceptions of the family situation.

With every suicide that takes place, there are a large number of affected people in each family—single or joint (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1:
Profile of Women Interviewed

	N = 136	%
Relationship with deceased		
Wife	98	67.60
Mother	28	20.60
Daughter	3	2.20
Sister	6	4.40
Sister in law	4	2.90
Daughter in law	3	2.20
Type of family		
Single	108	79.4
Joint	28	20.6
Age group ⁷		
Up to 25 years	10	7.4
25 to 35 years	31	22.8
35 to 50 years	54	39.7
50 to 60 years	23	16.9
> 60 years	18	13.2
Average age	46 years	
Minimum age	16 years	
Maximum age	90 years	
Caste		
Jat	95	69.9
Majhabi	20	14.7
Ramdasia	10	7.4
Ravidasia	2	1.5
Bairagi	2	1.5
Other	7	5.1

(Table 1.1 continued)

(Table 1.1 continued)

	N = 136	%
Landholding		
Landless	57	49.1
Marginal, having less than 1 hectare	43	31.6
Small, having 1-2 hectares	18	13.2
Semi Medium, having 2-4 hectares	11	8.1
Medium, having 4-10 hectares	5	3.7
Large having more than 10 hectares	2	1.5

Majority (62.5%) of the respondents were young, between 25 to 50 years of age. The average age of all the respondents was 46 years with maximum of 90 years and minimum 16 years. Two out of five respondent fall in the age bracket of between 35 to 50 years while over one out of five were between 25 to 35 years.

Most of the respondents (80%) interviewed were living in the nuclear family. The fragmentation of landholdings has a definite impact on the viability of the family income. Joint families, amidst severe hardships, are still able to bear out the vagaries of fluctuating market prices, pressure of loans, harassment of *arhtiya* or loss of crop as opposed to nuclear families, especially in the aftermath of distress suicides.

The learning and the exposure continued for me throughout the entire process as described below.

How I Went about It

This is an attempt to bring to the fore the subjectivities of the survivors of "suicide families", as they are called in the Punjab. These subjectivities fester amidst the harsh conditions already described in the vast range of existing literature pertaining to the agrarian crisis, both from academia as well as from peasant unions, not to forget the mainstream media's daily reportage. The tyranny of statistical data, of realities depicted in tabular format, renders individuals invisible, while the fetish of narratives, images and voices that soars high in popularity often obliterates socio-economic contexts. The contours

of what lies in between these two seemingly irreconcilable entities often manifest in glimpses; the form eludes us still because it represents a reality that is yet to be seen in its entirety. Both represent lived experiences that constantly overlap in the day-to-day reality of the peasant family. And the vision of emancipatory action pulls us closer towards a hope of what could emerge from the enmeshing of the two—again awaiting a voice and a shape. I consciously restrained myself from adopting any one form or method entirely. My attempt was to take my feminist understanding to a new and difficult area and to look at how patriarchy plays out in the lives of the unprivileged there. Being ill-equipped with any new method of charting my way through such terrain, I have attempted to foreground women's narratives while tabulating some data so as to render that which meets the eye or moves the heart into a form that can be shared with a wider audience. For example, contextualized data about insomnia and acute anxiety among women, or even about young girls being deprived of education in order to run the household, mitigates against the assumed normalcy of such phenomena. Or, the quantitative data helped document the alarming fact that the erosion of landholdings and other agricultural assets continues after a suicide in the family while it is more commonly known that a peasant suicide is often preceded by sale of family land.

This, therefore, is not yet another report on peasant suicides; it simply traces the impact of those suicides on the rest of the peasant household, especially women. This could not be done without acquainting oneself with the existing literature on peasant suicides and indebtedness and to overcome a reading habit that was highly selective. My case is that the majority of women in our country, despite what the various ministries and studies by funding agencies hoarsely proclaim, are not on the path of empowerment. Women's situation worsens as more and more women are becoming bereft of the means to take their lives forward. Even for those engaged in the process of seeking change, these structured barriers become insurmountable with changes ushered in by the economy or even, at other times, by conservative backlash. Making this case entailed using a structured questionnaire, interviews, field visits, meetings and discussions. At the same time, my own biases, assumptions and privileges could not be made invisible. As I stepped into the reality of peasant suicides with the support of peasant unions and academics, my preoccupations, both Marxist and feminist, were also clearly

stated. Yet, simply inching a bit closer to the lives and struggles of the peasantry made me question some dearly held assumptions and practices of feminist politics. Although I was certain that coming face-to-face with such a terrifying reality would be rewarding, I wondered—rewarding for whom?

I did not even know whether my questions would remain the same by the end of the exercise. In the entire process, tested ideas, assumptions and experience were renewed. It was bewildering at times, but the terrain was not entirely unknown. No difficulty or barrier seemed insurmountable at any point; my keenness to get into this long overdue exercise opened up paths and spaces I had not envisaged. Visiting a total of 54 villages and conducting all the interviews was undoubtedly a rich experience; rendering it all into a report or book has had some limitations that are difficult to describe (Table I.2).

I have attempted to put forward some narratives, some data and some insights gathered from the women of these districts, which occupy a large section of the Malwa region in the Punjab (see Map I.1). Names of almost all women who have been quoted have been changed to provide a semblance of anonymity. Each voice has been chosen that broadly represents the thoughts and dilemmas of many others like her. Accounts of unmitigated grief have been moderated with some generalizations and some ponderings. A preliminary visit to Sangrur district in 2006 had already brought me in contact with several families coping with the death of a husband or a son. This first set of interviews, put together, began to reveal an uncanny pattern of debts to be paid, children to be educated, *arhtiyas* to be kept at bay and a litany of health problems with the breaking down of the body and the mind, especially depression, which women were undergoing. The nonavailability of wage work was cited by some. The only income tended to be from the sale of milk. There was less ambiguity now about my assumptions. There

Table I.2:
Number of Blocks and Villages Covered in the Survey

	Total	Ferozepur	Muktsar	Bhatinda	Moga	Mansa	Sangrur	Barnala	Faridkot
Blocks	17	1	2	2	1	2	5	2	2
Villages	54	9	4	8	3	7	12	5	6
Inter-views	136	10	12	29	11	37	19	7	11

Map I.1:

The state of Punjab highlighting districts of the Malwa region covered in this survey



Source: Author.

Note: This map is not to scale and does not indicate authentic boundaries.

was a growing certainty that more extensive fieldwork was needed. The questionnaire was already in the making as its first draft evolved during the interviews. I felt a greater urgency to place this draft before women's groups. At the same time, linking my work with peasant unions was as important as I was sure that the findings of my fieldwork should be placed before the organized unions to elicit their response. I was sure that my fieldwork should take place within the purview of organized unions—the sharing of the findings and outcome of this research would be more meaningful if it could

be taken back to the field through them. I approached the peasant unions in late 2008.

In addition to helping me identify villages I need to visit and prepare lists of suicide families in each block, peasant unions became a significant point of engagement for my own vexed questions on the linkages between gender, caste and class. There was no aspect of women's lives as revealed in the interviews that I did not discuss with them. The unions, in turn, provided additional information. Even more crucially, the possibilities of organizing women or the difficulties in doing so were addressed by them during my interview visits. Differences of viewpoints did surface, but they seemed inconsequential in the face of the realities that these intense interviews began to unravel. More significantly, not once did I allow myself to forget the simple fact that I had come to see, write and report and it is the survey outcome that should speak. My interviews with the women would often be followed by the translator and accompanying comrades providing supplementary details about the suicide, indebtedness, litigation and family history. Seldom did the two renderings seem antagonistic. While making my notes fair in the early mornings, I would wonder at my otherwise questioning mind that was being transformed and trained in such a short time. I was so eager to simply absorb the nuanced and complex dimensions that the question of women's subordination in an agrarian milieu represents. There was so much to absorb, comprehend and act upon.

For instance, the single assumption that prevails throughout society and even among peasant unions is that of the peasant being male. In fact, the peasantry comprises every member of a peasant family or village; the participation of everyone in agriculture and reliance on it for sustenance makes the whole community part of the peasantry, despite the graded inequalities within. Further, the interchangeable use of "dalit" and "landless" to refer to the agricultural labourer persisted. Urging the respondents for information along the definitions I set would have perhaps been the biggest loss. This lack of precise terminology is ingrained in the depiction of local realities; it permeates the familiar world of those being interviewed. Despite becoming alert to these terms and their problematic usage, I desisted from freezing any categories. It was only while editing one's notes that there is an attempt made to minimize the inconsistencies for the reader.

My belief that I understood Punjabi was shattered in the very first visit to Punjab; anxiety reared its head, making me wonder about entering into an area where the very language was so alien. My own quiet confidence through years of feminist work and interaction—of being able to easily open conversations with women, thus making it easier for them to open up—received a few deft blows. Even though being accompanied by union members helped in breaking through communication barriers, I had to keep a strict watch on my own reactions and processing of such difficulties, as when dialogue would break off midway, or make quantum leaps. Yet there were moments that were validating as well: on one occasion an elderly woman, weeping profusely, said, "Why does she need to know Punjabi? Being a woman is sufficient to know what these tears express." Such interactions would deepen my resolve to attempt to understand the festering sorrow and deep pain of these women from whom I was so far removed by class, culture and language. A few times, I would be overawed to discover English expressions like "crisis", "depression", "education" and "technical training" used freely in the midst of the Punjabi dialect. Almost all families being interviewed were close to the peasant unions, if not direct members, and therefore easily used such expressions. Of course I did lose out on conversations between the translator and the respondent when the dialogues turned informal, that is outside the purview of a structured interview. Unlike in a working class area in Delhi or in a village in Orissa—where I could have read between the lines and gleaned a paragraph from a line spoken by a woman—I had, sadly, to be content with the reverse situation. In quiet alarm I witnessed paragraphs shrinking to a hurried synopsis, especially when my translator friends would become deeply engaged in conversation while I was left sipping hot sweet milky tea. When I would point this out later, mildly protesting, we would argue and laugh about the incident and try to figure out how to do the next few interviews.

Having of necessity to work with different translators in each area also posed some difficulties initially, but helped largely in the long run as each person brought in their own additional inputs. Wage work, domestic violence, children's education—these were some of the things that began entering my notes. When work truly began in full swing, from October 2008, I realized that not knowing the language actually had some advantages, as my other senses and perceptions were in full play. Especially in those moments before the

translation was done for me, I would be absorbing all the nonverbal clues in a more heightened manner than I might otherwise have done. I could "hear" more than what the words conveyed and saw much more happening around us in the households.

The learning and exposure in between the interviews were so compelling and rich that I am sure that an anthropologist may have done more justice to the data. While waiting once to go for a public meeting for which buses had been arranged, I watched quietly as the women, hurriedly returning from the gurudwara or from tending to their livestock, gave tea to all and breakfast too. Lunch had to be packed too before boarding the bus. The men had been busy a few days before the event. Some women were very excited, while a few were ready to doze off from sheer fatigue after their morning chores—participating in rallies does not imply even minimally letting go of household routines. As the bus finally started, the political and the personal collapsed into one. Never once I was alone in such observations. The translator along with some women urged me to jot all this in my notebook. They insisted I write how much the women had done while the men had only organized the buses. Everyone laughed in unison. I said that there is a camera inside me, everything is being recorded. Such humour would be both subversive and engaging; it is beyond me to draw in more interesting detail of these moments. Or, at other times, the curious mixture of the religious, social and political would come together in intense moments, which I could scarcely absorb in their entirety. Once during an early morning ritual walk to the gurudwara, between muttering prayers, a woman shared a bit more of her life than what the questionnaire had elicited. Trying hard to follow the dialect, I heard the word "crisis" interspersed liberally in the low drone chanting of the morning prayer. I just felt the earth spin a bit faster, as all notions of formal and informal studies and research tools and attendant methodologies seemed to fly off wildly into the emerging dawn.

Being immersed in such tragic circumstances and stories also took its toll. A single village has so many incidents of suicide that sometimes a single lane has a succession of houses, in each of which a family member has committed suicide. The community sense of loss and the deep anxiety of those living are palpable. There's familiarity with suicide written on many other faces too, even those very young. A great deal of pain and anguish surfaces at times when peasant suicides, retrenchment, displacement, slum demolitions and

factory closures are gaining momentum, but is there any method or tool to capture the emotional turmoil of entire communities? Unfortunately, relational affinities and emotional fulfilment of those directly impacted are overlooked; people become mere statistics used again and again, for revealing socio-economic-ecological disasters in studies. Bringing their voices and thought to such statistics continues to be seen as neutralizing the objectivity of the findings. What if we were to find ways to show the quantum of emotional suffering? This was one of the searching questions that remain with me to date. The intensity of these interviews affected my sleep and took grotesque forms in my dreams; they even made the days more sombre. I would occasionally take a long break so that I could engage again. And an intense sharing with friends and comrades in Punjab and Delhi always convinced me I had to take this work forward to its completion.

There were two field visits in October and November 2008, when I spent a few more days in Ferozepur district and part of Mansa. The questionnaire was then openly shared with those I met from the peasant unions, and revised in collaboration with them. Most eager for feedback, I made the first presentation of the findings in a seminar organized by the School of Women's Studies in Jadavpur University in December 2008. These 31 interviews were then discussed in an article sent to a journal so as to seek feedback and suggestions from friends and activists in other regions as well as formally commit myself to the research output.⁸ I took this discussion to both college students and to seminars. Any queries or doubts, and even the silences, helped me focus more and more on what was beginning to unravel before me. Then, in March 2009, I set out on the long stint with a revised questionnaire, summoning up all my inner resources to accost the whole sordid reality with even greater concentration. I used to be consumed with self-doubt, especially as the initial target of 50 interviews crossed 100. I went deep into the Malwa region and followed the gory trail of death and devastation and the nerve-racking daily battles of unions and families with the *arhtiyas* and recovery agents. This time, the districts covered included more of Mansa and Sangrur, Moga, Barnala, Muktsar and Bhatinda.

I returned to Delhi for a short break and assumed I would not have to go on another field trip till I had done some work on my existing data. But I went to Faridkot in July 2009. This would make the sample set of districts of the Malwa region more contiguous (see Map I.1). With the help of friends, I had begun doing some amount

of quantitative analysis of the figures gathered, and published the preliminary findings from a total of 125 interviews in some English dailies and web sites. Friends also helped in getting these translated into Punjabi, Hindi, Oriya and Kannada. This too helped in terms of providing an identifiable research output. What I was still resisting delving into were the long interviews and women's narratives. By January 2010, I was beginning to get feedback with reference to the sample representing size of landholdings and detected some gaps. I began comparing my findings with other studies done on Punjab, and got back in touch with the unions. Soon I was in Sangrur once again to complete the last few interviews.

This time there would be no returning to the field without first having a draft of the writing exercise—I often wondered whether it would be a study or a book or a survey. I finally chose 136 interviews from over 150, rejecting the ones that seemed incomplete in some important detail. The distance from the field at times seemed conducive to writing and reflecting, and at other times debilitating to the point where I would feel it was impossible to write even a page more without going back there. But commitments in Delhi and my own economic need for a steady job could not be kept at bay any longer. Reading the detailed interviews and making notes helped me begin to see the big picture. Finding my hypotheses and assumptions being validated by the women's own narratives was cathartic, yet more tormenting than satisfying. Such moments reinforced my sense that this was not a study or a piece of research alone—an inexpressible sense that recurs even now. Any further comments on the methodology and its dilemmas or inadequacies are included as footnotes in their specific contexts, otherwise this experience of the interviews and all else would itself become the longest chapter.

Notes

1. The country has seen over a quarter of a million suicides between 1995 and 2010. The National Crime Records Bureau places the number for 2010 at 15,964. This brings the cumulative 16-year old total from 1995—when the NCRB started recording farm suicide data—to 2,56,913. The last eight years have been the worst indicating an increase in the trend. P. Sainath; *In 16 years, farm suicides cross a quarter million*; The Hindu; October 29, 2011. New Delhi.

2. Farmers' and Agricultural Labourers' Suicides due to Indebtedness in the Punjab State (Pilot survey in Bhatinda and Sangrur Districts), Submitted to the Government of India, Department of Economics and Sociology, Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana; April 2009.
3. Arjun Sengupta's Report on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector by NCEUS, Government of India, August 2007.
4. See article named Nationality Question in the Punjab, pages 182–204, in *Symphony of Freedom*; Papers on Nationality Question, Presented at The International Seminar, February 16–19, 1996, AIPRF, New Delhi.
5. The Green Revolution ushered in widespread changes in the 1960s in the institutional and economic infrastructure through massive public investment. Irrigation and power development, agricultural research and extension services and the strengthening of the co-operative credit structure characterized it. Punjab led the country's Green Revolution and earned for itself the distinction of becoming India's 'bread basket'.
6. *Agrarian Crisis and Farmers' Lives*, Dr Ramamohanam Memorial meeting by PUDR, Nov 7, 2004, New Delhi. Speakers included Sucha Singh Gill, K Balagopal and Jayati Ghosh.
7. There's ambiguity expressed about age as most women calculated it based on years of marriage or birth of the first child. There is plain hesitation too. At times, a woman would come up as we were leaving and whisper her age to me. Invariably otherwise, I got rounded numbers of 40 or 45 or say 60 or 70. The pattern was uncannily similar and there would be light laughter too.
8. On Women Surviving Farmer Suicides in Punjab, *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 9, 2009.