

Childhood smothered in shadow of suicides

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On the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's 60th martyrdom day, children of farmers, who committed suicide in Punjab, were in the capital today to give voice to their experiences.

Sixteen-year-old Manpreet used present tense while talking about her father instead of past tense and corrected herself soon enough. She was nine-year-old when her father's body was recovered from the fields of Govindpura. "My father was indebted with Rs 2,50,000 that he could not pay back," said Manpreet. "We are extremely helpless. My mother is a daily labourer and it has become difficult for us to survive."

She has written a letter to the concerned authorities asking for help. "We go to the school empty stomach as there is no food in the house at times," she writes.

"I know she wants to study and earn us a living but she also misses all pleasures she deserved," said Paramjeet, Manpreet's mother. "I still remember my husband Gurjant Singh lying dead in the fields."

"We want these voices to be heard. So that people know the ground reality in Punjab," said Manmeet, who is producing a documentary regarding the victims of agrarian crisis in Punjab. "These are some of the selected children from Sangrur district. There are more than



Children of Sangrur farmers, who had committed suicide, at a press conference on the occasion of the 60th death anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi in New Delhi on Wednesday. Tribune photo: Manas Ranjan Bhul

thousand victim families."

Twelve-year-old Jasbir Kaur cooks for her siblings after her mother left the family and most likely is no more. "My father committed suicide after selling the only one-acre land that we had," said Jasbir.

She sings a song that makes all the neighbours cry. The song in Punjabi talks about a girl calling her mother to talk to her and share experiences. "...What kind of a maternal house would that be where there is no mother."

Similar is the tale of Sher Mohammad and his sister Salma from Govind Garh village. "My father committed suicide in 1998. He had taken a debt of around Rs 1 lakh," said Sher Mohammad. "People still come down to the house and bother us asking for money."

Tahrugh Khan's wife Mantari Devi committed suicide in 2004 following the finan-

cial crunch in the house. Tahrugh's son Naresh Khan and his other siblings eat what their father earns in the day. "He only has one eye and it's very difficult for him to work efficiently," said Naresh.

"One has to look at the larger picture here. The Punjab government does not want to highlight these issues as it does not go well with the prosperous image of the state," said Manmeet.

"Poor farmers are being forced to take up debts to buy machines and chemicals that are not even healthy," said Vandana Shiva from Navdanya, the NGO that provided platform to the victim families to talk. "This is nothing less than a genocide."

Some individuals though have taken initiatives to sponsor the education of these children. One of them is Inderjeet Singh Jaijee, who has started a collective to help the families in the state.