

Farmer Suicides in India



(Source - <http://images.indianexpress.com/2015/07/karnataka.jpg>)

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Lead Essay

Farmer Suicides in India

Section 1: Introduction

India lives in her villages¹, said Gandhi almost a century ago. According to the 2011 census, 68.84% of Indians still live in rural areas¹. As it is the case in any rural economy, many people in India are still dependent on farming for their livelihoods. 54.6%² of the total workforce in India, which translates to 263 million individuals, are engaged in the agriculture sector. However, despite successes associated with the Green Revolution, the overall contribution of the agriculture sector to India's GDP has been falling steadily over the past decades Everson & Gollin (2003). The latest economic data shows that the sector contributes only 13.7%³ to the overall GDP of India, as compared to 52% in 1950-51, suggesting that relative productivity in agriculture has declined dramatically.

Most researchers point to the general decline of the agriculture sector as starting from the early 1990s, right after the induction of neo-liberal economic policies. The support given to the agriculture sector was taken away and manufacturing and services sector were given priority. Even though the policy shift has proved beneficial to the country's economic growth, researchers and policymakers argue that the sheer neglect of the primary sector has proven to be costly. Some even argue that farming has become an unviable profession as acknowledged by the then Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh in a speech given in 2007:

"Rates of growth of agriculture in the last decade have been poor and are a major cause of rural distress. Farming is increasingly becoming an unviable activity⁴."

The neglect of the agriculture sector by policy makers is perceived to have caused a huge strain on the rural economy of the country. Apart from having economic impacts, this has started showing serious social implication on the lives of farmers. The general dissatisfaction amongst farmers has culminated in a serious social issue in the form of farmers suicides. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), a total of 284,694 Indian farmers⁵ have committed suicide in the last 18 years⁶. The rate of suicides among farmers is 47% higher than the general population. And, in addition, the suicide mortality rate between 1996 and 2005 amongst male farmers is 26% higher when compared to male non-farmers (Mishra 2007), a gap that has only emerged recently.

Suicide Mortality Rate (SMR) for Male Farmers and Male Non-Farmers in India: 1996-2005



¹ http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2/data_files/india/Rural_Urban_2011.pdf

² <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/content/farmers-have-decreased-farm-labourers-increased-census-report>

³ http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-08-30/news/41618996_1_gdp-foodgrains-allied-sectors

⁴ <http://www.pib.nic.in/newsite/erecontent.aspx?reid=28277>

⁵ <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/columns/sainath/farm-suicide-trends-in-2012-remain-dismal/article4860980.ece>

⁶ IBID

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Figure 1: Suicide Mortality Rate (SMR) for farmers and non-farmers in India, 1996-2005 (Source: Misra, 2007)

In addition to the steep recent relative increase of farmer suicides, the overall level is very disturbing: Every 30 minutes, an Indian farmer commits suicide⁷. However, this issue has received very little attention in the Indian media such that the general public is hardly aware of the issue and its severity. In addition, or perhaps as a consequence, the issue is hardly seriously addressed by policymakers. This may be in part due to a lack of understanding of the causes and contributing factors to suicides which have been hardly explored seriously.

A suicide is an act of extreme mental distress. There are many triggers, which push a person into taking this extreme step, but most of the research done in India tries to determine a mono-causal relationship for the phenomenon. So far, factors like indebtedness (Jeromi2007), globalization (Shiva 2004), liberalization of the economy (Nagaraj 2008) have been cited as the major reasons for farmer suicides in India. However, the potential impact of these factors has so far not been rigorously investigated, let alone compared to each other in a rigorous manner.

The remaining part of this article is divided into four sections. Section 2 discusses the factors contributing to farmer suicides in India. Section 3 reviews the existing literature on the subject in detail. The final section proposes the methodology that may be employed to carry out the study.

Section 2: Potential factors contributing to farmer suicides in India

The view of the government

For up to almost a decade after the increase in farmer suicides in the early 1990s, the Indian government at both the central and state levels denied its large-scale existence and dismissed them as random occurrences. However, the continued occurrence of suicides amongst the farming community forced certain state governments like Maharashtra, Punjab & Karnataka, where the numbers were remarkable high, to take note and set up their own enquiry commissions to look into the impending threat. All the government reports unequivocally concluded that farmer suicides were occurring on such a large scale only due to social factors like alcoholism, health related ailments and indebtedness. This conclusion has been criticized vehemently by academics as the government has ruled out the role of the economic policies adopted by it in determining farmer suicides in their respective states.

The view of the media

Farmer suicides have received relatively little attention in the media in recent decades as most corporate media outlets tend to focus on issues that attract more viewers and readers such as fashion and pop culture, a view prominently taken by P Sainath, a prominent journalist who has reported extensively about the issue⁸. At a lecture given at Pondicherry University about agricultural distress and farmer suicides in India, he lists the agrarian crises in Indian, the reduced government involvement in the agricultural sector and rising inequality due to Tax breaks given to multinational corporations as the main reason behind the reason increase in farmer suicides.

Academic research

The bulk of academic research on the issue has been conducted by left-wing academics. Their studies have identified that the privatization of seed sector, the increase in the price of farm inputs due to the influx of private companies, and indebtedness caused due to lack of formal credit as the main reasons behind increased farmer suicides.

⁷ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/williampentland/2011/05/18/every-30-minutes-an-indian-farmer-commits-suicide-biotech-is-not-to-blame/>

⁸ For instance, P Sainath points out that while media-houses sent hundreds of reporters to cover a popular fashion event in Mumbai, not a single one was sent to Vidarbha just a few miles away, where hundreds of farmers had taken their lives

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Section 3: Review of the Literature

Suicide is a complex phenomenon and has been researched extensively in the fields of philosophy, sociology and psychology. The interest of economists in suicides, however, is recent.

The ground breaking work on suicides was done by Emile Durkheim (Durkheim, 1951), who analyzed the phenomenon from a sociological perspective. His work on bi-dimensional categorization of suicides has molded the views of social scientists about this issue.

Of late, economists have taken a liking to this topic because of the extreme nature of choices a person has to take in order to commit suicide. Becker & Posner (2004) has laid down some theoretical foundation for economic research in this area. However, the first economists to address the topic of suicides are Hamermesh & Soss (1974) who seek to explain suicides using an utility maximization model. Confirming predictions of their model, they empirically show suicides decline with income. The predictions of Hamermesh and Neal Soss could match with the Indian scenario, i.e. suicide rates are very high amongst poor subsistence farmers when compared to rich farmers.

According to the Public Health Action for the Prevention of Suicide Report published by the WHO, suicides are estimated to contribute to more than 2% to the global burden on disease by the year 2020. The same report also acknowledges the fact that vulnerability of suicides is high in low and middle-income countries. The Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences has estimated the loss of productivity in America due to suicide as \$11.8 billion. Though the above data present a grim picture about suicides, the fact remains that suicides are preventable unlike other major health issues.

The mental health status of a farmer in a country that is undergoing economic and cultural transition at a phenomenal rate is under-researched and has to be given priority (Patel, 2001).

Even though the phenomenon of farmer suicides has not received much media attention, studies conducted so far have shown that farmer suicides are a global problem. Farmers in both developed and developing countries are more likely to commit suicide when compared with other professions within their countries. Even though farming is considered to be a peaceful and healthy way of life, agriculture has the highest rates of mortality in any industry globally (McCurdy S & Carroll DJ, 2000).

Studies conducted in the fields of clinical psychiatry and psychology has confirmed that farmer suicides are a global phenomenon. Behere & Bhise (2009) bring out the cultural reasons for farmer suicides in different regions of the world. They have also argued that the high level of stress involved in the profession of farming as the major cause for suicides amongst farmers in many countries.

In a developed country like United Kingdom despite the amount of subsidies given the farming sector, farm workers account for the largest number of suicides in any occupation group (Gregoire, 2002). He argues that farmers are committing suicides due to poor understanding of mental health in rural communities.

The French research institutes report, (Surveillance of mortality by suicide among farmers, 2013) has revealed that in France the suicide mortality rate of a male farm worker is 20% higher than a normal French man. In addition, when we compare the suicide mortality rate of the French dairy farmers vs. the rest of the population the figure increases by a huge 47%.

The New York Times investigation into the phenomenon of farmer suicides in China⁸ has revealed that Farmer suicides are increasing at a time when the overall suicides rates have decreased sharply. The cause of farmer suicides seems to be the general disliking towards the Chinese government policy towards forced urbanization.

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A study done by the NRHA about suicides in rural Australia, 2009 has found that men in regional and remote areas were 1.3 to 2.6 times more likely to end their life by suicides than their urban counterparts. Even in a country like the USA that farmer suicides are a recurring reality. Steven Gorelick in his article "The Farm Crises" notes that American farmers are committing suicides at a rate three times higher than that of the general population.

As mentioned above in section two most of the research done by academics has squarely blamed the neo liberal economic policies of the government as a major cause of farmer suicides in India. At the same time, Nagaraj (2008) showed the uneven distribution of farmer suicides across India.

Shiva (2004) has linked the occurrence of farmer suicides with the opening up of the seed sector to global corporations in India. She argues that the change in the input economy of agricultural production along with the loss of farmer's right to save the seed for next season has put the farmer into a spiraling debt cycle, which is causing them to commit suicide. Mohanty (2005) evaluates the cause for farmer suicides in Amaravati & Yavatmal districts in the state of Maharashtra. He employs the Durkheimian theory, which attributes suicides to a historically specific combination of social and economic causes. He argues that suicide is an effect of individualization, a process of socio-economic 'estrangement' from agrarian communities experienced by rural producers in the context of rapid economic growth.

Section 4: Conclusion

Farmer suicides in India has been rising consistently in the last two decades. But, for all its seriousness this issue has received scant attention amongst the people in the policy making arena. Though suicides are a complex socio, economic, and medical issue, the literature says that it could be effectively countered. For that we need to shed our reluctance towards discussing about issues relating to mental health and suicides. And, finally any government policy that tries to increase the welfare of farmers in India should also take into consideration the stark reality of farmer suicides and protect them unnecessary exogenous policy shocks.

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Headlines

Banks Are Fleecing Their Customers

(Moneylife, Sucheta Dalal March 27, 2017)

The one entity that we are supposed to trust with our hard-earned money is our bank. And, yet, in the past couple of months, you would have noticed newspapers headlines, WhatsApp messages and social media discussing how customers are robbed, hoodwinked or cheated by banks which have complete contempt for their largest stakeholders. The outpouring of public outrage ought to make the regulator and policy-makers sit up. But they have maintained an impervious silence. Public anger is concentrated mainly in three areas.

Read more: <http://www.moneylife.in/article/banks-are-fleecing-their-customers/50065.html>

Date Accessed: 27.03.2017

Economy

Breaking Down the Finance Bill's All-Encompassing Amendments

(Thewire, Vatsal Khullar, Tanvi Deshpande March 22, 2017)

Note: The Finance Bill is an annual government proposal that usually announces the levy of new taxes or changes in the country's tax structure. This year's Finance Bill was introduced in Lok Sabha on February 1, 2017. On Tuesday, amendments to the bill that impacted, changed or tweaked up to 40 different laws were circulated. Because the Finance Bill is a money bill and doesn't have to go through the Rajya Sabha, opposition parties have condemned the current Finance Bill, saying it is a "backdoor" route for the Centre to pass a number of non-finance related amendments. The piece below breaks down the more contentious amendments.

Read more: <https://thewire.in/118131/finance-bill-2017/>

Date Accessed: 27.03.2017

Central Ministry, State Government Departments Publicly Expose Personal Data of Lakhs of Indians

(Thewire, March 23, 2017)

New Delhi: At least one central government ministry and multiple Indian state government departments currently expose the personal information of thousands of Indian citizens through their websites – information that shouldn't actually be available so freely. The personal data in question, in some cases, includes names, addresses, date of birth, Aadhaar card numbers, PAN card details, religion and caste. All of this information, which should be securely and safely stored, is available in the form of Microsoft Excel sheets and can be obtained by a simple Google search.

Read more:

<https://thewire.in/118250/government-expose-personal-data-thousands-indians/>

Date Accessed: 27.03.2017

Farmer's Notebook: Native Cows Could Help Prevent Farmer Suicides

(Thewire, M.J. Prabhu, March 23, 2017)

Agriculture is no longer the work of illiterate farmers who depend on middlemen and grow crops using obsolete methods, doing the same run-of-the-mill job day in and day out. The IT revolution has brought sweeping changes to India's agriculture industry. The skinny, dhoti clad, unshaven farmers of the past have been replaced by young, educated men in jeans, Nike sneakers and Ray Bans, who are taking a new, more sophisticated approach to the profession.

Read more: <https://thewire.in/118377/farmers-notebook-native-cows-could-help-prevent-farmer-suicides/>

Date Accessed: 27.03.2017

A timely step: State-owned banks should address their NPAs

(The Hindu, March 27, 2017)

The Finance Ministry's unequivocal missive to 10 state-owned lenders to submit time-bound turnaround plans, or forsake any further capital infusion from the government, is a small yet timely step in the right direction. As the Reserve Bank of India had flagged in its last Financial Stability Report, risks to the banking sector remain worryingly "high". The continuous deterioration in asset quality, especially at the public sector banks (PSBs), has led to low profitability and substantial value erosion to the principal shareholder — the government. As the RBI's report pointed out, PSBs saw the proportion of their gross non-performing assets to total advances almost double in the 12 months through September 2016 to 11.8%.

Read More: <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/a-timely-step-stateowned-banks-should-strive-to-address-their-npas/article17668164.ece>

Date Accessed: 27.03.2017

Economy

‘Labour laws being consolidated into four codes’

(*The Hindu*, March 24, 2017)

A day-long conclave on ‘Transformation of Employment and Social Security Laws’ was held by Employers’ Federation of Southern India - Andhra Pradesh and Telangana States Branch (EFSI-AP and TS) in association with Sri City, on the latter’s premises here on Friday.

AP Director of Factories G. Balakishore, who presided over as the chief guest along with Sri City Foundation president Ramesh Subramaniam, maintained that the government with the aim to reduce compliance hassles for companies was putting in efforts to consolidate all labour laws into four broad labour codes.

Read more: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/labour-laws-being-consolidated-into-four-codes/article17653400.ece>

Date Accessed: 27.03.2017

Dispute at Maruti Suzuki highlights India’s growing jobs malaise

(Iain Marlow and Upmanyu Trivedi, *Live Mint*, March 27, 2017)

In a crowded court just outside Delhi, the fate of 148 men caught up in a deadly labour dispute at India’s largest carmaker is set to be decided, in a case that highlights the unrest rippling across India’s industrial landscape.

An argument between workers and a supervisor over conditions turned violent at a Maruti Suzuki India Ltd plant in the state of Haryana in July 2012. A manager was burned to death when protesting workers allegedly set a fire on the factory floor, leading to a one-month shutdown. They were charged with conspiracy to commit murder, arson and rioting in a case likely to be decided 10 March.

Read More: <http://www.livemint.com/Companies/dFvLgmMPzLnfYpoTyalHJ/Dispute-at-Maruti-Suzuki-highlights-Indias-growing-jobs-mal.html>

Date Accessed: 27.03.2017

Governance & Development

DEVELOPMENT

The twin pit solution

(Jamie Myers & Robert Chambers, *The Indian Express*, March 27, 2017)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has set October 2, 2019 as the target date for rural India to be Open Defecation Free (ODF). Remarkable progress has been achieved, but there is still a very long way to go. In rural north India, at least half the toilets that are functioning are not used by all members of the household all the time. Often, the toilet is used sparingly, to delay its filling and to postpone all the costs and pollution entailed in getting it emptied.

Read More: <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-twin-pit-solution-rural-india-narendra-modi-open-defecation-free-swachh-bharat-mission-sanitation-fertilisers-4586857/>

Date Accessed: 27.03.2017

EDUCATION

HCL to hire kids directly from school: Does this mark a divorce of education, employment in India?

(Kaushik Gangopadhyay, *Firstpost*, March 27, 2017)

Education has largely been associated with quality of living for more than a century. Even today, people pursue their interest in music or Sanskrit to enrich their lives rather than for gainful employment. However, it is a truism that technical education-courses, like Bachelors in Engineering or Bachelors in Technology, are inherently tied to employment and job prospects.

Read More: <http://www.firstpost.com/business/hcl-to-hire-kids-directly-from-school-does-this-mark-a-divorce-of-education-employment-in-india-3353974.html>

Date Accessed: 27.03.2017

HEALTH

Finally, a health policy for all of India

(Karan Singh and Parijat Ghosh, *Livemint*, March 24, 2017)

The proposed blueprint is targeted, sensible and comprehensive. Significantly, the policy takes a holistic view of the health system and achieving better outcomes across elements of access, cost and quality—all closely inter-related. The policy looks to increase access to care by expanding coverage to the underprivileged and under-served and focuses on primary healthcare packages with geriatric, palliative and rehabilitative services. It also looks at increasing hospital beds to 2 per 1,000 people from an appalling 1.3 in 2012. Importantly, there is a commitment to increasing the public spending on healthcare to 2.5% of gross domestic product (GDP) to help finance these initiatives.

Read More: <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/zDMYPgcmTmAPxiM3jUBQ0I/Finally-a-health-policy-for-all-of-India.html>

Date Accessed: 26.03.2017

LAW AND JUSTICE

Building a legal ecosystem for Aadhaar

(*Live Mint*, March 27, 2017)

The government's approach is at odds with the Supreme Court's. In August 2015, a three-judge Supreme Court bench allowed the government to use Aadhaar for the public distribution system and for distributing liquefied petroleum gas cylinders. In October that same year, the Supreme Court also allowed the government to use Aadhaar for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and the Prime Minister's Jan Dhan Yojana, among a handful of schemes. In both instances, however, it stipulated that the Aadhaar scheme must remain voluntary and could not be made mandatory until such time as the matter was

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finally decided.

Read More: <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/aDeLoJRt0lYN9wyt0ETn5N/Building-a-legal-ecosystem-for-Aadhaar.html>

Date Accessed: 27.03.2017

Society

CASTEISM

How English Creates a New Caste System in India

(Sunil Bhatia, *Pacific Standard*, March 23, 2017)

In 1835, Lord Macaulay famously provided the rationale for teaching English to a select group of Indians, “We must do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.”

Read More: <https://psmag.com/how-english-creates-a-new-caste-system-in-india-9481ad31db8a#.1p6ve2rfv>

Date Accessed; 27.03.2017

GENDER

India 131st Of 188 Countries On The Human Development Index, Even Worse For Gender Inequality

(Rukmini S, *The Huffington Post*, March 21, 2017)

India is placed in the bottom of five categories of countries when it comes to gender parity, and is classified as having "low equality in HDI achievements between men and women". Women in India complete half as many years of schooling on average as men, and have less than half the share of men in the Gross National Income. It also ranks 125th of 159 countries on the Gender Inequality Index on account of the prevalence of teenage mothers, the low share of women in Parliament and the low female labour force participation rate compared to men.

Read More: http://www.huffingtonpost.in/2017/03/21/india-131st-of-188-countries-on-the-human-development-index-eve_a_21904123/

Date Accessed: 26.03.2017

New maternity bill is a Trojan Horse

(Rupa Subramanya, *The Times of India (Blog)*, March 27, 2017)

On March 9, 2016, the Lok Sabha approved the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Bill 2016, having already been approved by the Rajya Sabha in the winter session of Parliament.

The Bill only awaits the signature of the President before it becomes law. Its main and much talked about provision is increasing paid maternity leave from 12 to 26 weeks. This change is in line with the recommendation of the 44th session of the Indian Labour Conference, a high level advisory group convened by the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MLE). The move is also in line with recommendations by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (WCD) and associated stakeholders going back to the previous Congress led government.

Read More: <http://blogs.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/voices/new-maternity-bill-is-a-trojan-horse/>

Date Accessed: 27.03.2017

India and World

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

China benefits from nuclear disorder

(W. P. S. Sidhu, *Live Mint*, March 27, 2017)

The rise in global nuclear disorder and its increasing disconnect from world order is epitomized in the nuclear weapon programmes of two weak and potentially failing states—Pakistan and North Korea. While both these countries might understandably perceive some advantage to having acquired nuclear weapons, the real beneficiary is China.

Beijing's acts of commission and omission in enabling both these crises-instigating states to build nuclear arsenals pose twin threats to the post-Cold War nuclear order.

Read More: <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/UuFHHkDvuifH59pjLoRTzM/China-benefits-from-nuclear-disorder.html>

Date Accessed: 27.03.2017

Opinions/ Books

OPINIONS

Revisiting India's nuclear doctrine

(Priyanjali Malik, *The Hindu*, March 27, 2017)

Nuclear weapons deter other nuclear weapons. To require them to do more is to imbue these weapons with even more political meaning than they now carry. This ultimate weapon is already a political force: from the limited number of states who can possess them, to the devastating generational and environmental consequences of their use, nukes are, in the late K. Subrahmanyam's words, "the million pound note" that is not to be squandered lightly. That is why a policy of No First Use works well: it builds stability into deterrence by credibly promising nuclear retaliation in the face of extreme provocation of a nuclear first strike by one's adversary. It promises to take both you and your adversary to the abyss and raises the cost of the adversary's first strike immeasurably. That is all we need these weapons to do militarily.

Read More: <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/revisiting-indias-nuclear-doctrine/article17668024.ece>

Date Accessed: 27.03.2017

Meatless in Agra: Minorities Hope For Peace, But Fear Prevails

(Priya Solomon, *Quint*, 27 March, 2017)

A few kilometres apart in Agra, the minority communities have the same fears but different hopes from Yogi Adityanath. For the Muslims, his initial move has wrought havoc with their lives, while Christians see some hope despite a tempered anxiety. For a usually bustling market, where meat shops and people constantly jostle for space with goats and stray dogs, Ghatiya wears a deserted look.

Read More: <https://www.thequint.com/india/2017/03/27/muslim-christian-shut-slaughterhouses-under-yogi-adityanath>.

Date of Access: 27.03.2017

Ganga a 'Living Entity': What Does That Mean for the River?

(*The Quint*, 20 March, 2017)

The Uttarakhand High Court on Monday recognised river Ganga as the first 'living entity' of India, granting it the same legal rights as a human being.

Being recognised as a living entity has several legal implications. Since the High Court order is not out in public domain yet, one can't be sure of what the order exactly means.

Nature having rights, however, has precedence in several other countries where similar legal orders have been passed.

<https://www.thequint.com/environment/2017/03/20/ganga-is-now-a-living-entity-what-does-it-mean-for-the-river-uttarakhand-high-court-order>

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Why I would not advocate vegetarianism

(Sunita Narain, *Down To Earth*, 27 March, 2017)

As an Indian (I underline Indian) environmentalist I would not advocate vegetarianism for the following reasons. One, India is a secular nation and the culture of eating food differs between communities, regions and religions. This idea of India is non-negotiable for me as it reflects our richness and our reality. Two, meat is an important source of protein for a large number of people, hence critical for their nutritional security. Thirdly, and this is what distinguishes my Indian position from the global, meat eating is not the key issue, it is the amount that is consumed and the manner in which it is produced.

Opinions/ Books

A recent global assessment, for instance, finds that Americans on an average eat 122 kg per year per person and Indians 3-5 kg per year per person. This high meat consumption is bad for health and the environment. In fact, the average American consumption of meat is 1.5 times the average protein requirement.

Read More: <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/why-i-won-t-advocate-vegetarianism-57449>.

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