



# Sikh Research Journal

**Vol. 6 No. 2**

This article is from \*Sikh Research Journal\*, the online peer-reviewed journal of Sikh and Punjabi Studies

Sikh Research Journal \*Vol. 6 No. 2 Published: Fall 2021.

<http://sikhresearchjournal.org>

<http://sikhfoundation.org>

## Farm laws, Indian capitalism and Hindutva

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As part of Hindutva's politico-economic perspective on India, with a specific focus on the agrarian economy, the current Bharatiya Janata Party government (henceforth the BJP), which represents Hindutva ideology, brought in three Ordinances on June 5, 2020, in the name of reforming agricultural marketing and improving farmer welfare. All three were given hurried Parliamentary and Presidential approval, without stakeholder consultation or proper parliamentary scrutiny, before becoming law in September 2020 (Singh, T et al 2021).<sup>22</sup> These Ordinances were the following: the *Farmers' (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Ordinance, 2020*; the *Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Ordinance, 2020*; and the *Essential Commodities (Amendment) Ordinance, 2020*.<sup>23</sup>

On the face of it, these farm laws may appear to be measures aimed solely at agricultural marketing reform. However, to view them only as marketing reform measures would be deceptive and illusory. Penetrating behind those illusions may reveal to us the reality of deeper connections between these laws and the historically specific conjuncture of Indian capitalism, and the link between that conjuncture of Indian capitalism and the Hindutva ideological perspective on India.

At first glance, there does not seem to be a direct relationship between the farm laws and Hindutva. The relationship works through several mediations. We look at these mediations below in arriving at the concrete relationship between the farm laws and Hindutva. In an attempt to tease out these mediations, we approach this subject in the following order: first, we consider at the changing facets of Indian capitalism from 1947 onwards; second, we study how nationalism and centralisation occupy key pivotal positions in these changing facets; and third, we

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<sup>22</sup> The materials from two earlier articles (P. Singh 2020a, 2020b) and T. Singh *et al* (2021) have been so extensively used in this article that the relevant passages have not always been cited here except in those cases where a specific point refers to the earlier articles. I strongly recommend that the reader consult T. Singh *et al* (2021) for an in-depth examination of many aspects of the political economy of the laws, policies and protests that have a bearing on this article, which focuses mainly on the interconnections between the farm laws, the Indian mode of capital accumulation and the Hindutva vision on India.

<sup>23</sup> Since the three Ordinances after being introduced as Bills in Parliament became Acts or laws after the Parliament approval and the Presidential assent, the words Ordinances/Bills/Acts or laws are used interchangeably in the paper.

investigate how nationalism and centralisation are critically placed in relation to the Hindutva vision of India, and how the agrarian strategy behind these laws is linked with the latest Hindutva view of Indian capitalism and its link with the Hindutva transformation of India.

Given the vast scope of the subject being covered, this article forms an introduction to the subject, and can be considered as a proposal for a project involving various aspects that would need detailed empirical exploration and substantiation and, indeed, theoretical elaboration.

### **Indian capitalism and nationalism**

The history of Indian capitalism in the post-1947 era can be divided into three main phases according to significant developments: the Nehruvian state capitalist model of development from the First Five Year Plan till roughly 1991; the neo-liberal model of capitalism with some specific Indian variations especially relating to poverty reduction and social security under the Manmohan Singh-led policy regime from 1991 until 2014; and lastly the Hindutva variation on the neo-liberal model of development from 2014 onwards. In the Hindutva model, there has been competition between the *swadeshi* model promulgated by some pro-RSS ideologues and the Modi-led global India model. In that internal competition the Modi model has clearly triumphed. Despite these variations between the three phases and those between the two strands of the Hindutva model, what all phases and strands have in common is the embedding of nationalism.

This nationalism was expressed through the circulation of slogans such as, among others, the historic-sounding 'nation in the making', the ideological 'idea of India' and the reverent 'mother India'. Common to all such formulations was the imagining of India as one family or entity or identity. This oneness was both territorial and ideological. The anti-colonialism of India's movement for Independence from British rule, expressed through the concept of *swarajiya* (self-rule) for Indians, empowered the ideology of Indian nationalism in the mass consciousness. The imagination of the self-awakened India aiming to achieve *swarajiya* (self-rule) had special resonance with the majority Hindu population because of the prospect of ending many centuries of rule by non-Hindus and consequently of Hindus regaining power. The ideological and emotional legacy of this anti-colonial self-rule nationalism was a powerful emotional current, and an ideological worldview linked to the concept of India as one unified and proud nation. Whether it was the inward-looking import-substituting model of the

Nehruvian era, the outwardly oriented export-promotion model of the Manmohan Singh era, or indeed the global India model under Modi, nationalism remained the central ideological force in policy-making and in economic strategies as well in related policy initiatives such as those related to foreign policy or defence policy.

### **Indian nationalism (Congress and Hindutva versions) and centralisation**

The project of creating India as one unified nation out of existing multiple identities as multiple nations/nationalities, regions, linguistic communities, religions and castes was pivotal to the movement for national independence from British rule which was hegemonized by the Indian National Congress under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru (Chandra et al 2017). In building this unified India in which all diverse identities are either annihilated or muted or transformed in conformity with that unitarian vision, centralisation was seen, especially by Nehru who became its chief proponent, as a key politico-ideological, institutional and economic strategy (Singh 2008, Anderson 2013, Singh 2014). It was partly the Congress's unitarian vision that led them not to accede to the Muslim League's demand for regional devolution of powers as outlined in the Cabinet Mission proposals. It was the rejection both of the Muslim League's demand and of the Cabinet Mission proposals by the Congress led by Nehru which eventually led to the partition of India (Jalal 1985, Singh 2008). Nehru and his colleagues believed that accepting the vision of federal devolution proposed by Jinnah would negate the Congress's strategic vision of welding a strong unified Indian nationhood together out of multiple identities. Contrary to official proclamations by the Congress Party and its post-1947 governments in India about the tragedy of the partition, Nehru and his colleagues were hugely relieved with the creation of Pakistan because they could then get on, unhindered, unchecked and unquestioned, with the project of centralised governance in India (for documentation, see Singh 2008, especially chapter 3 'Federalism, Nationalism and India's Development Strategy: An historical overview and analytical framework'). Nehru was a non-practising Hindu or, at best an atheist, but his almost romantic notion of India's historically unified identity meant that he equated the Hindu religion with the nation. In his much-celebrated book *The Discovery of India*, Nehru writes: 'Hinduism became the symbol of nationalism. It was indeed a national religion, with all those deep instincts, racial and cultural, which form the basis everywhere of nationalism today' (cited by Anderson 2013: 54). Nehru's Hindu bias was not religious *per se* but was closely entwined with his desire to build a strong united India with a highly centralised power structure.

Nehru was also a strong believer in centralised planning as a strategy for the capitalist industrialisation of India (Bettelheim, 1968; Chakravarty, 1989; Desai, 1959, 1984, 1975, 2004). This belief led him to argue for centralisation. Furthermore, central planning in the Nehruvian strategy was not merely an economic project; it was also seen as a political project to unify the nation by reducing inter-regional disparities through the regulation and allocation of centrally-controlled public sector investment in different regions (Singh, 2008). The Nehruvian project was ostensibly 'secular' in character but because Hindu majoritarianism was structural (due to the overwhelming Hindu majority among India's population), it had the consequence of entrenching Hindu majoritarian bias in Indian institutions (Singh, 2015; Rehman, 2016; Mohapatra, 2017; Deshpande & Palshikar 2019). Nehruvian centralisation wedded to a strong sense of Indian nationalism that was believed to be necessary to build one unified Indian identity was a crucial force in the creation of the requisite ideological, cultural and institutional space for the emergence of a Hindu version of strong Indian nationalism.

Despite the continuity of the centralist approach taken by the Nehruvian Congress towards Indian nationalism and Hindutva nationalism, the crucial difference between Congress-inspired nationalism and BJP-RSS-inspired nationalism is that the latter is explicit in its ideological commitment to build 'Hindu' India. This ideological adherence to a unified Hindu India leads the BJP to take a much more aggressive approach towards centralisation than the Congress. Its promulgation of the concept 'One India, One Agriculture Market' in defence of its farming policies articulated through the farm acts, its aggressive promotion of Hindi over regional languages (far more than the Congress ever did during its reign), its decision to scrap Jammu and Kashmir's constitutional status and statehood, and its New Education Policy are some of the key indicators of the BJP's aggressive agenda of centralisation. More recently, the central BJP government has extended the powers of the Border Security Force (BSF) beyond the previous 15 kilometres from the international border to 50 kilometres (Jagat, 2021). This measure, as much as the farm laws, is a link in the chain of aggressive centralisation pursued by the current BJP regime.

The BJP sees the emergence of regional nationalist identities in states with religious Hindu majority but a significant history of opposition to the Hindu/Hindi identity, such as the Tamil and Bengali identities to name just two, as obstacles to the emergence of a transregional Indian Hindu identity. Conversely, the more articulate proponents of regional identities such as the anti-caste Tamil thinker and politician

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy viewed regions as spaces of ‘counter-hegemonic force’ against Brahmanical Hinduism (Dhanda, 2021). Just as the BJP views regional identities with suspicion – as a subversion of its agenda to create an overarching Hindu identity – the regions suspect the BJP of working towards the annihilation of regional identities (Singh 2020d).

The farmers’ movement has been a critical catalyst in drawing attention to the anti-federal and anti-regional implications of the farm laws and Hindutva centralism. The full implications of the farmers’ movement against centralisation and the Hindutva Indian nationalism aligned with that centralisation are likely to emerge more clearly in the near future in the form of greater resurgence of regional nationalist identities and political formations.

### **The Hindutva vision behind the farm laws**

The three pieces of legislation introduced hurriedly by the Modi regime during the Covid health crisis must be seen against the backdrop of the ongoing massive consolidation of select industrial groups known to be especially close to the prime minister. This intervention in agriculture by the Modi government constitutes a watershed moment in demonstrating the government’s twin aims, first, to increase the participation of domestic agrobusinesses in the field of farm production, and second, to enhance central government control of agriculture in India. Agriculture has always primarily been a ‘state’ subject but is coming increasingly under the purview of the central government (Singh 2020c, 2020e, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, and forthcoming). The essential objective behind the three Acts taken together is to encourage private investment by agrobusiness corporations, both domestic and foreign, in the production, processing, storage, transportation, and marketing of agricultural products. The centralised control and regulation of the economy and its increased privatisation is at the core of the BJP’s intention to promote the Hindutva agenda aligned with global capitalist economy. In the internal organisational and ideological struggle between the tendency towards inward nationalism (*swadeshi*) and the tendency towards outward-oriented global capitalism within the BJP/RSS, the Modi tendency, with its roots in Gujarati business conglomerates and representing global capitalism has decisively won. The victory of the Modi school of thought has been facilitated by the structural transformation of India’s capitalist economy; the neo-liberal integration of Indian capitalism with global capitalism is signified dramatically by the 1991 neo-liberal economic reforms brought in by the then Congress government.

The tension between the states – the locations of different regional identities – and the Centre over the farm acts has been one of the defining features in the recent political and economic scene in India. The sharp polarisation between regional identities and the BJP's unitarian Hindutva agenda was most dramatically demonstrated during the recent West Bengal State Assembly Elections in May of 2021. In the last few years, West Bengal has seen a strong emergence of the regionally-based All India Trinamool Congress party (popularly known as the TMC) led by Mamata Banerjee, the current chief minister of Bengal. In the recent assembly elections, Banerjee was able to defeat the BJP convincingly by articulating the aspirations for a Bengali regional identity in opposition to the Hindu identity that was vociferously projected by the BJP during the campaign. The farmers' organisations had actively campaigned against the BJP in this election, and the active role played by Punjab-based organisations during the campaign against the BJP seems to have played a decisive role in shaping the election results in constituencies with substantial numbers of Sikh voters.

### **Conclusion**

Nationalism has been central to the shaping of Indian capitalism in the post-1947 period, with its roots in the shaping of the Indian nationalist vision during the struggle for independence from British rule. The ways in which nationalism has embedded itself in different strategies of Indian capitalist governance have mutated over time but the embeddedness has not changed. Centralised control and regulation of the economy and politics has been viewed by all nationalist strategies as critical to making India into one unified nation. The marriage of centralisation and nationalism in the creation of Indian capitalism has been the material foundation for the rise of majoritarian Hindu nationalism. The three farm laws enacted in 2020 were aimed at extending the centralisation of agriculture. The organisational and ideological ascendancy of the Modi faction within the BJP/RSS gave further impetus to articulating Indian nationalism by projecting India as a great power in the new global capitalist economy. The neo-liberal turn of the Indian economy and the closer integration of the Indian capitalist economy with global capitalism unleashed the international capital accumulation strategies of Indian conglomerates, which saw Modi's agenda as fitting perfectly well with their interests. The farm laws, alongside those accumulation strategies, were aimed to encourage domestic agro-business corporations in alliance with global corporations to take centrally-managed control of the production, marketing, transportation, storage and processing of agricultural commodities. This gigantic project of the

centralisation of agriculture under the control of agro-business corporations faced stiff resistance from farmers, non-BJP state governments and regional national identities in India.

**Post-script:** The massive and unprecedented farmers' protest against the BJP's farming strategy represented by the three farm laws lasted for more than a year and eventually forced the government on November 19, 2021, to announce that the laws would be repealed in the session of the Indian parliament starting on November 29. The victory of the farmers' movement is a serious setback to the so far unchallenged rise of Hindutva both in India and in the Indian diaspora. The assertion of regional identities in the face of the aggressive centralisation of Hindutva also contributed to the farmers' victory, and these two forces – regional parties and farmers – joined hands in many places but most crucially in the West Bengal assembly elections.

Some of the non-BJP state governments too sensed the risk to their rule stemming from the BJP's aggressive centralising agenda, and extended support to the farmers' movement as a way of confronting that agenda. The coming assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh in 2022 could be the next crucial battle between Hindutva's centralising agenda and its opponents. In the long term, if the centralisation of economic, political, cultural and ideological powers is not reversed, majoritarian Hindu nationalism will remain in control whether in power or in opposition. That is a challenge for anti-Hindutva forces that goes beyond the contestation over farm laws.

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(Acknowledgements: I am thankful to Rachel Miller and Diditi Mitra for useful suggestions on revising an earlier draft. The usual disclaimer applies).