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## **Dalits and Farmers' Movement in India**

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### **Abstract**

The farmers and laborers were two primary stakeholders who comprised a majority of protesters at the most recent farmers movement on the borders of Delhi, the capital of India. While the farmers are mainly the land-owning upper caste communities known as Jats (Sikhs in Punjab and Hindus in other northern states), the laborers belong to generally landless lower castes (referred to as Dalits). The farmers' movement saw overwhelming use of the slogan *Kisan Mazdoor Ekta Zindabad* (Long Live the Unity of Farmer and Laborer). Both groups provided strength to the farmers movement which eventually succeeded in repealing the three farm laws passed by the central government of India. However, the relationship between farmers and laborers has a dark side too. The interests of both groups are opposed to each other's because Jats want to continue their domination over Dalits, including keeping them underpaid and as bonded laborers. The Dalits are gradually asserting themselves. They hope to become landowners by acquiring villages' common land that are reserved for Dalit communities. In this essay, I reflect on this point of convergence and divergence in the interests of farmers and laborers and ponder its significance for the organization of agriculture in Punjab.

### **Introduction**

While the farmers are mostly upper castes (Jat Sikh in Punjab and Jats in the Hindi belt), the farm laborers belong to marginalized scheduled caste (SC) communities widely referred to as Dalits. The Dalits are "...a group of 200 million people relegated below the 3,000-year-old Indian caste system. Members of higher castes—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas—maintain control of knowledge, resources, and power..."<sup>1</sup>. In sharp contrast to all of India where Dalits comprise

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<sup>1</sup> Suparkash Majumdar, "Modi's Farm Bills and Their Repeal Will Do Nothing for This Group", *Foreign Policy* December 6, 2021, accessed April 30, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/06/india-farm-bill-dalit-bonded-labor-modi-bjp-landlord/>.

16.6 percent of the population, Census-2011, reported that the group accounts nearly for 32 percent of the total population in Punjab. The demographic strength of this group, who are an important source of labor, make them a crucial stakeholder in the agricultural sector. Also, as per the 2011 Census, there were 1.1 million labor workforce in Punjab of which roughly half were engaged as farm laborers.<sup>2</sup> “Agriculture contributes not more than 15% of the gross domestic product (GDP); however, it continues to engage nearly 60% of the workforce. In the absence of growth in the rural non-farm sector, people have had little option but to fall back on agriculture.”<sup>3</sup> The decadal growth of the Dalit population in the state is almost double than the entire state. More than two-thirds of the Dalit population (73.3 percent) in Punjab live in the rural areas.<sup>4</sup> Yet, 71 percent of Dalits work in agriculture. They own just 9 percent of the total agricultural land. They are mostly laborers. Some of them also work as bonded laborers.<sup>5</sup> A large number of them work as daily wagers in Agriculture Produce Marketing Committees (APMCs). They are paid cash wages mostly on a daily basis and in some cases, meager monthly salaries. “These daily wage laborers not only work in the farms, but are employed in great numbers at the APMCs to clean, sort, load and unload grains at the *mandis*. If the *mandi* system and the APMCs disappear...”, they would be equally affected with farmers.<sup>6</sup> This is the reason that they remain deprived of banking services. Being landless, they cannot pledge any property because it is an impediment to acquisition of loans from commercial banks. They are forced to rely on non-institutional sources to get credit even to meet emergency expenses, like weddings and medical services. In order to meet those expenses, Dalit laborers borrow money from their landowning employers. Because most laborers are unable to repay the loans, the burden falls on their children. The children end up working

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<sup>2</sup> Vivek Gupta, “Why are the Dalit landless farm labourers of Punjab protesting the new agri laws?”, *Gaon Connection*, December 14, 2020, accessed <https://en.gaonconnection.com/why-are-the-dalit-landless-farm-labourers-of-punjab-protesting-the-new-agri-laws/>.

<sup>3</sup> Anisha George and Awanish Kumar, “Class in itself? Caste in Itself? Exploring the Latest Phase of Rural Agitations in India”, Conference Paper No. 38, the 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the BRICS Initiative for Critical Agrarian Studies, October 13-17, RANEP, Moscow, Russia.

<sup>4</sup> Government of Punjab, “Scheduled Castes Sub Plan, 2020-21”, Department of Social Justice, Empowerment and Minorities: Chandigarh.

<sup>5</sup> Suparkash Majumdar, “Modi’s Farm Bills and Their Repeal Will Do Nothing for This Group”, *Foreign Policy* December 6, 2021, accessed April 30, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/06/india-farm-bill-dalit-bonded-labor-modi-bjp-landlord/>.

<sup>6</sup> Vivek Gupta, “Why are the Dalit landless farm labourers of Punjab protesting the new agri laws?”, *Gaon Connection*, December 14, 2020, accessed April 30, 2022, <https://en.gaonconnection.com/why-are-the-dalit-landless-farm-labourers-of-punjab-protesting-the-new-agri-laws/>.

for the same landowning farmer, not to mention that their children's educational pursuits remain incomplete because they generally work alongside their family in the agriculture fields. This is the predicament of the laborers contrary to that of the landowning farmers who employ them. The landowners are much better placed in all aspects of their lives-social, economic and political.

Although Dalits joined hands with the farmers in the movement, the sense of victory felt by the farmers at their repeal was not something of great joy for Dalits because more than 90 percent "...of the agricultural labor force-, ...own only small amounts of land or no land at all".<sup>7</sup> "In Punjab, upper castes, mostly Jat Sikhs, dominate the farming landscape. Only 3.5% of private farm land belongs to Dalits who make up 32% of the population, according to the agriculture Census of 2015-16. The national average is 8.6% of farm land for 16.6% of Dalits."<sup>8</sup>

The central government of India faced one of the biggest and a year-long protest around the borders of Delhi. The three laws<sup>9</sup> galvanized not only farmers to launch a massive resistance against the central government, but also mobilized society at large to show sympathy and support to the farmers movement. Initiated in Punjab and slowly moved to the borders of Delhi, the farmers' protests eventually extended to other states of India as well, such as Kerala, Assam, Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka. The protest movement mobilized "farmers in an increasingly nationwide pushback against Prime Minister Narendra Modi's proposal to overhaul the way many of the country's 146 million farms do business."<sup>10</sup> The farmers believed this overhaul of the agricultural sector "...will lead to lower prices and pave the way for corporate takeovers of their small farms, which average less than three acres in size."<sup>11</sup> The movement witnessed participation from diverse sections of the society namely, teachers, students, small businesses, professionals such doctors and engineers, labor unions, employees unions, Dalits, Diaspora, artists, actors, singers etc. The

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<sup>7</sup> Suparkash Majumdar, "Modi's Farm Bills and Their Repeal Will Do Nothing for This Group", *Foreign Policy* December 6, 2021, accessed April 30, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/06/india-farm-bill-dalit-bonded-labor-modi-bjp-landlord/>.

<sup>8</sup> Manu Moudgil, "Fist For Farm: How Punjab's Dalits Are Fighting For Their Right Over Common Land", *India Spend*, August 8, 2019, accessed <https://www.indiaspend.com/fist-for-farm-how-punjab-dalits-are-fighting-for-their-right-over-common-land/>.

<sup>9</sup> Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, 2020; Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020; and Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Emily Schmall, "Indian Farmers Protests, in Challenge to Modi" *The New York Times*, October 22, 2021, accessed May 8, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/04/world/asia/india-farmers-protest-pollution-coronavirus.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

most famous slogan of the recent farmers' movement was *Kisan Mazdoor Ekta Jindabaad* (Long Live the Unity of Farmer and Laborer).

This broad solidarity across the nation created much trouble for the central government.<sup>12</sup> Through the protests, the farmers had not only shown displeasure toward the farm laws, but also expressed anguish against the corporate houses that are venturing into the farm sector. It is the threat of loss of land at the hands of corporate houses perceived by the farmers which unified both farmers and laborers in this movement.<sup>13</sup> “Many farmer unions branded the acts, hurriedly approved by the Indian parliament in September 2020, as anti-farmer, arguing that removing a local market system set up by the government would have left farmers at the whim of corporations. Farmers have also urged the development of a minimum support price law to ensure that corporations do not have too much control.”<sup>14</sup> This unity crossed national boundaries bringing together those in India and abroad. In the end, the union government was compelled to repeal the farm laws, a victory that was celebrated enthusiastically.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, it would be naïve to look at the solidarity between farmers and laborers as evidence of erasure of their long established hierarchical relationship in the rural society of Punjab. I assert that the unity of farmers and laborers forged and projected in the movement was superficial. The landless Dalits laborers were either felt compelled to offer support or coerced to join the protest movement as they had no other way out due to their utter dependence on farmers for earning livelihood and economic sustenance. In the following section, I expand on my assertion.

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<sup>12</sup> Emily Schmall, “Indian Farmers Protests, in Challenge to Modi” *The New York Times*, October 22, 2021, accessed May 8, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/04/world/asia/india-farmers-protest-pollution-coronavirus.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Ranjini Basu, “The Threat of Corporate Interests Is a Key Unifying Factor in the Farmer Protests”, *The Wire*, Jan 21, 2021, accessed May 18, 2022, <https://thewire.in/agriculture/farmers-protests-agriculture-laws-corporate-interests>.

<sup>14</sup> Suparkash Majumdar, “Modi’s Farm Bills and Their Repeal Will Do Nothing for This Group”, *Foreign Policy* December 6, 2021, accessed April 30, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/06/india-farm-bill-dalit-bonded-labor-modi-bjp-landlord/>.

<sup>15</sup> Kusum Arora, “From Students, Dalits to the Punjabi Diaspora, Volunteers Made the Farmers’ Protest a Success”, *The Wire*, November 21, 2021, accessed May 2, 2022, <https://thewire.in/agriculture/from-students-and-dalits-to-the-punjabi-diaspora-volunteers-made-the-farmers-protest-a-success>.

### Dalits and Farm Protests in Delhi

Jat farmers were at the center of the farmers movement in Delhi movement and they are also the oppressors of Dalits whom they employ as farm laborers as well as own as bonded farm laborers. Not only do the Jats employ/own members of the local Dalit population, but migrants from other states are kept as bonded farm laborers too in Punjab. This is not a new practice. Rather, it has been going on for decades.<sup>16</sup> In some cases, it has been found that they keep their bonded laborers tied in iron chains in order to prevent them from escaping.<sup>17</sup> It is this power, they used to coerce support from Dalit farm laborers as a way to add numerical strength to the movement.<sup>18</sup> The Jats instructed Dalit families to send at least one member to Delhi farmers protest. The Dalits, of course, joined hands with the farmers due to dependence on farming for their livelihood. They are socio-economically disadvantaged. “Despite being a noteworthy size of workers and population of agricultural laborers, their socioeconomic conditions have deteriorated over time and have reached a level that raises alarm.”<sup>19</sup> Their sources of income are limited as well.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, their very existence is entirely contingent upon laboring in agricultural land owned by upper caste landowners. Corporatization of agriculture would diminish the need for manual laborers as a result of mechanization of farm work. Consequently, Dalit landless farm laborers of Punjab perceived their socioeconomic trajectory intricately connected with that of the Jat landowners and decided to participate in the movement.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Manjit Singh, “Analysing the Effectiveness of the Programmes for the Eradication of the Bonded Labour System”, Report on Bonded Labour in Punjab, Centre for Education and Communication: New Delhi, 2007, accessed May 17, 2022, <http://cec-india.org/libpdf/1437547414Effectiveness-of-the-Eradication-of-Bonded-Labour---Punjab-2007.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> “Punjab: Three Children among five members of bonded labourers’ family rescued in Amritsar”, *The Times of India*, July 22, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Suparkash Majumdar, “Modi’s Farm Bills and Their Repeal Will Do Nothing for This Group”, *Foreign Policy* December 6, 2021, accessed April 30, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/06/india-farm-bill-dalit-bonded-labor-modi-bjp-landlord/>.

<sup>19</sup> Anurag Chaudhary and Sukhpal Singh, “Socio-Economic Conditions of Agricultural Labourers in Punjab”, *Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics*, Volume 76, Number 3, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Sanjoy Chakravorty, S Chandrasekhar, and Karthikeya Naraparaju, “Income Generation and Inequality in India's Agricultural Sector: The Consequences of Land Fragmentation”, Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research: Mumbai, 2016 accessed May 24, 2022, <http://www.igidr.ac.in/pdf/publication/WP-2016-028.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> Vivek Gupta, “Why are the Dalit landless farm labourers of Punjab protesting the new agri laws?”, *Gaon Connection*, December 14, 2020, accessed April 30, 2022, <https://en.gaonconnection.com/why-are-the-dalit-landless-farm-labourers-of-punjab-protesting-the-new-agri-laws/>.

It should be noted that government attempts to redistribute land more equitably have also failed. In order to promote more equal land distribution among different castes, the central government established the Punjab Village Common Lands<sup>22</sup> (Regulation) Act in 1961. This Act reserved 33 percent of agricultural village common land for Dalits. But with the Act's poor implementation, the upper caste farmers continue to retain overwhelming control of all common land of the villages including the reserved land. The rich and upper caste farmers secure annual leases of common land by fielding proxy Dalit farmers who are mostly their employees. So, the annual auction of common land is only a formality.<sup>23</sup> It is in fact the main bone of contention between farmers and laborers. The farmers and Dalits have been involved in clashes with each other over the issue of 33 percent share of the common land reserved for the Dalits in the villages of Punjab. The clashes were mainly occurred in the villages of Malwa region of Punjab over the past five years.

Surprisingly, the Dalit panchayats (local self-government at village level) announced support to the farmers movement. The Dalits, who till the common land of the village, are not necessarily concerned about earnings from the land, but sense a kind of pride in owning the land. Ownership would mean full autonomy where they can farm without any fear of economic, physical and sexual exploitation. Hence, Dalits are now demanding for the right to lease the common land with terms of fixed 33 years. This dynamic makes "Most of the interests of Dalit rural laborers and their dominant farming caste employers opposed to each other. As recently as 2020, during the covid-19 lockdown, farmers would often seek to lower wages or rely on machinery instead of labor, to save money, creating even more hardship amongst the laborers."<sup>24</sup> During the lockdown, migrant farm laborers went back to their home states leading to scarcity of labor in Punjab. The farmers reduced wages for local Dalit laborers. It was significantly less in contrast to what was being paid to migrant laborers. The situation led to a point where farmers got resolutions

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<sup>22</sup> Technically village commons lands are part of Government land which actually recorded in the name of the government in the registry. State laws used different terms and provide institutional mechanisms for management of village commons. Some states have enacted laws for use and management of grazing lands among others and endowed Gram Panchayat with the responsibility of management and protection. Common land tenure is mostly linked to access and user rights with limited management rights in India.

<sup>23</sup> Suparkash Majumdar, "Modi's Farm Bills and Their Repeal Will Do Nothing for This Group", *Foreign Policy* December 6, 2021, accessed April 30, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/06/india-farm-bill-dalit-bonded-labor-modi-bjp-landlord/>.

<sup>24</sup> Jens Lerche, "Jat Power and the Spread of the Farm Protests in Northern India" *The India Forum*, March 21, 2021, accessed April 30, 2022, <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/jat-power-and-spread-india-s-farm-protests>.

passed by panchayats for paying fixed wages to local farm laborers. The farmers announced social and economic boycott of those Dalit laborers who would defy the panchayat resolutions. It widened the already extant social rift between these two groups of stakeholders.

Despite the divergent interests, the leaders of the farmers movement sought support from "...the unions representing mainly the regular urban workers, supporting their claims for the repulsion of the present anti-labor laws" and "rural laborers and Dalit organizations into their campaign, with some success." As a result, The Bhim army, a radical Dalit activist group from Uttar Pradesh and the radical Dalit grassroots movements for Dalit land rights in Punjab, the Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee (ZPSC) joined the protesting farmers in Delhi.<sup>25</sup> Another left-leaning organization Krantikari Pendu Mazdoor Union (KPMU) from Punjab also joined protesting farmers to forge farmer-laborer unity. The Dalit leaders vowed to fight in unity with farmers against the three farm laws passed by seemingly dictatorial government.<sup>26</sup> The leaders of the Dalit rights organisations in Punjab were of the view that agriculture is the base of Punjab's economy. So, the three 'black' agricultural laws would not only ruin upper caste farmers but also farm laborers. They remarked that "The fight is against fascism. It is the need of the hour that farmers, laborers and minorities along with other marginalized sections should join hands to defeat a fascist government that the BJP is leading."<sup>27</sup> Thus, apprehension of subordination by a "Hindu Caste Nation" motivated the Dalits to also take part in the movement.<sup>28</sup>

Taken together, "Farmers from marginalized communities in Punjab believe that they will be the worst sufferers of the newly enacted laws which seek to facilitate contract and large farm-based agriculture."<sup>29</sup> Some Dalit organizations such as Sat Guru Ravidas Dharm Samaj, Ludhiana (Punjab), were of the opinion that the three farm laws of the central government would prove detrimental to the economic progress of the Dalits. They felt that all the gains would be lost due to implementation of farm laws. The leaders of the Dalit organizations opine that they

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> The Indian Express, March 1, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Avtar Singh, "Dalit labour unions joining farmers' stir on Delhi border", December 03, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Abhay Kumar Singh, "Why Are Dalits Supporting Farmers? Chandra Bhan Prasad Explains", *The Quint*, Feb 12, 2021, accessed April 30, 2022, <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/dalit-solidarity-with-farmers-protests-chandra-bhan-prasad-explains>.

<sup>29</sup> Ravi Kaushal, "How Dalits Became Part of Farmers' Movement in Punjab", *News Click*, December 23, 2020, accessed April 30, 2022, <https://www.newsclick.in/How-Dalits-Became-Part-Farmers-Movement-Punjab>.

do not face such caste discrimination in Punjab as is faced by their counterparts in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and others.<sup>30</sup>

It is this entire context of Jat-Dalit relationship that should be considered in understanding “kisan mazdoor ekta” in the recently concluded farmers movement in India.

### Conclusion

Despite the opposing interests of farmers and laborers that exist in reality over the issues of farm wages as well as lease of the common land in the villages. The slogan, *Kisan Mazdoor Ekta Jindabad*, of the farmers' movement serves as a trendsetter from Punjab. The movement capitalized the unity and awareness of farmers and laborers. In this way, it attempted to remove earlier shortcomings of farmers' movements. So, farm movements in other States like Uttar Pradesh can take their cue from Punjab's social engineering of farmers movement to include farm laborers who are equal and important stakeholders in the farm sector. “Farmer-laborer unity must be inculcated and practiced. It is crucial to sustaining the movement.”<sup>31</sup> Apart from this alliance with laborers, the farmers movement can further evolve by “presenting a kind of template for future struggles. Having deliberately aligned their movement with agricultural laborers, they are now trying to join forces with workers of organized as well as unorganized sectors. The leaders of this movement have opened new vistas for joint mass agitations.”<sup>32</sup> But analysis of this unity must grasp it in all its complexities in which it was created. Only then will it be possible to better understand the farmers movement and its impact on the agricultural sector of Punjab and possibly, India.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Shivam Mogha and Sunil Choudhary, “Why the Farmers' Movement Can't Ignore Landless Dalits of Western UP Anymore”, *The Wire*, April 14, 2021, accessed April 30, 2022, <https://thewire.in/agriculture/why-the-farmers-movement-cant-ignore-landless-dalits-of-western-up-anymore>.

<sup>32</sup> Satyendra Ranjan, “Farmers' Protest: A Roadmap for the Opposition”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.56, Issue No. 18, (2021).

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