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**Mending the Social?**  
**Reflections on the Farmer's Agitation in Contemporary India**

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**Abstract**

This essay is a reflection of some of the distinctive aspects of the ongoing farmer's movement in India that has passed its one-year mark. Situating the movement in the agrarian context of the region, I show the multi-pronged nature of the movement and the diverse tools that it has deployed for protesting against the controversial farm laws, which if it had been implemented would have further aggravated rural distress in the region. In this essay, I claim that the movement is also unique in the alliances that it has forged in the course of articulating its resistance, which though not firmed up as yet, has the potential to strengthen India's democracy.

**Introduction**

Drawing on a social movement perspective, this article dwells on the distinctive aspects of the ongoing farmer's agitation in India, which has now lasted for nearly a year. Farmer agitations in rural India are not new, in fact at different historical conjunctures, peasants and farmers have risen up in protest against prevailing exploitation and marginalization and thus, reflecting their 'revolutionary potential'<sup>1</sup> (Shah, 2001). In the recent years too, we have witnessed a recurrent manifestation of discontent among farmers through their campaigns and long marches to the capital city. They have sought intervention as the importance of agriculture gradually declined in the national imagination (Jodhka 2018, Gupta 2005).

In this essay, I make an attempt to situate and understand the ongoing farmers movement in the Punjab-Haryana-Western Uttar Pradesh region since June-July 2020 onwards in Punjab, after the ordinances<sup>2</sup> were published and more intensely

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<sup>1</sup> The debate pertaining to whether Indian farmers had revolutionary potential or not is quite old. (See Ghanshyam Shah (2001) for a full account.

<sup>2</sup> The farm ordinances led to 3 bills being passed in September 2020 which "aimed at transformation of agriculture and raising farmer's income." These were the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill, 2020; the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm

since November 2020 when farmers started gathering at the Singhu and Tikri borders of Delhi. Is it a mobilisation like the ones we have seen before by the farmers' or does it signal a deeper crisis in the agrarian society in India? What is distinctive about the nature of this mobilisation? What possibilities do social movements like these, offer for our democracy?

Through analysis of newspaper accounts, blogs, speeches, interviews and academic articles, this piece argues that a) the ongoing farmer's movement is distinctive in the range of questions that it has raised; it reflects a crisis within rural society that has intensified due to a deepening of globalization; the movement unfolded several interwoven narratives and contexts and needs to be understood in the larger context of dispossession brought on by neoliberal policies; b) a distinctive aspect of this struggle has been the forging of intersectional alliances, between erstwhile antagonistic groups, across caste, class, gender and religion; though not yet settled, these alliances create a sense of hope in alternative possibilities that might evolve and strengthen Indian democracy; c) the movement is also distinctive in its use of nonviolence as a strategy of protest despite violence and non-recognition by the state in the course of their long struggle; the alliances and relationships that have been forged during this period have the potential of mending a society that is fractured along multiple lines.

### **Multi-pronged character**

The farmers' mobilization, which began since June 2020, have been hailed as 'the largest farmer's protest in the world' (Lerche, 2021). These protests may have started against farm laws and the demand for making Minimum Support Price (MSP) into law, but it has raised a range of issues that affect the farmers today. The issues range from struggles around the viability of agriculture to questions of food security, from the fears of land dispossession and a consequent loss of farmers' identity, to the long term demand for land reforms, equality and social justice as the spectre of corporatisation of agriculture looms large (Sandhu 2021, Sinha 2020). There were initial attempts at several rounds of dialogue between the representatives of farmer unions and the government, but the lack of progress towards finding a solution led to a decision by the farmers to continue their agitation

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Services Bill, 2020; and the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, 2020 which were passed in September 2020.

by staging sit-ins at different borders of Delhi, since they were not allowed to enter the city.

Their agitation gradually expanded to providing a critique of the government and its stance, as they travelled to other states like West Bengal to mobilise support for their cause. Sections of the movement have even upheld the right to dissent by protesting against the UAPA laws which have imprisoned social activists and intellectuals and the reading down of Article 370 (Singh, 2021) by the government. Expanding the scope of their protest can be seen as an attempt to challenge the legitimacy of the government itself and work towards a change of regimes. This attempt to connect with the other ongoing social movements and lend their support and express solidarity is an unique aspect of the farmers' movement, as it upholds and recognises people's voices in a democracy.

While the peasant movements in the colonial period highlighted the excesses of colonial rule as well as degradation of their lives as a result of an exploitative feudal social structure, it was through the many *satyagrahas* during the colonial period that the larger nationalist concerns of the peasants became manifest. Similarly, farmer's movements during the 1980s were distinct as they were led by the owner cultivators (and not peasants). They demanded subsidies in electricity, irrigation facilities, seeds and also articulated the divide between 'Bharat versus India' (Jodhka, 2018). These agrarian protests also saw the growing importance of farmers' organisations like the Bharatiya Kisan Union and Shetkari Sangathana which kept away from party politics and thus consolidated their leverage as a pressure group. Being multi pronged in nature, these mobilisations also 'tried to influence the national policies on prices and taxation structure as well as the approaches to basic planning and development' (Gupta 2002 :195). The ongoing agitation needs to be seen in relation to other such protests which have occurred during the decade of the 1990s, after the new economic policies were introduced. The new economic policies brought in several changes in agriculture which included trade liberalisation, fall of subsidies and other protections enjoyed by agriculture which has adversely affected productivity, the increasing volatility of agricultural markets which has had an impact on cropping patterns and so on. The current movement has evolved into a larger one attempting to address various cracks in the structure of Indian society.

However, a concern that still remains neglected are the implications of farming in an ecologically degraded region, with depleting groundwater levels. This could be salvaged if there is diversification in cropping patterns. Though the farmers' mobilisations of 2018 had raised the concerns of climate change, the issue seems

to have been bypassed the agitating farmers as well as the state (Kumar et al, 2020). A historical understanding of movements thus provides a glimpse of the changing rural life over the years. A singular narrative of protest demanding the revocation of farm laws and the reinstatement of the minimum support price (MSP) is not helpful to comprehend either the complexity or the variety of issues that affect the farmers in India today or the significance of the farmers' movements for Indian society.

Nevertheless, these multi layered narratives of protest are valuable in themselves as they reflect the existing context of rural distress and concerns of regional political economy. Apart from the rich scholarly works (Kumar 2018, 2021; Jodhka 2012) which have documented the changing dynamics of social relations in a predominantly agrarian society, these protests reveal how the major faultlines of caste, class, gender and religion that have shaped agrarian relations in the region are being negotiated and bridged in interesting ways through the intermediation of the farmers' organisations, in the context of these protests.

### **Of intersectional alliances**

The contemporary farmers movement has created space for erstwhile antagonistic groups to come closer to each other in a society which is deeply patriarchal and feudal in character. In order to understand the nature of agrarian social relations in the region, a few words on the nature of Indian rural life is necessary. Rural society in India is a differentiated universe constituted of a range of interests in land. Though the pattern of landownership is uneven in the villages and broadly corresponds to the caste hierarchy, the land based arrangements vary regionally. For example, while in the Gangetic plains land is cultivated primarily by tenants, sharecroppers and small farmers, land is owned and cultivated largely by Jat landowners with the assistance of agricultural labourers who belong to the lower castes in Haryana, Punjab and Western Uttar Pradesh. Traditionally, though the big, small and marginal farmers share similar caste backgrounds, the relationship between the landowners and agricultural workers, who are largely drawn from the Dalit and lower artisan castes among the Muslims, is dependent and antagonistic in nature.

Uttar Pradesh has seen farmer's movements in the 1980s. The farmers were brought together by Mahendra Singh Tikait under the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU). In BKU's parlance, a cultivator had to be a landowner in order to be recognised as a farmer, and by this definition agricultural labourers were excluded. Tikait included Muslim farmers and forged strong ties with them (Gupta, 2001). The unity between

the farmers suffered in the absence of a strong leader especially after Tikait passed away. Further, the decline of the *jajmani* system which held groups together however unequally, the rise of nonfarm occupations which led to the migration of the youth eroded the 'agrarian sociality' (Kumar, 2018) allowing for gradual inroads of right-wing divisive politics in the region. The slow communalisation of politics resulted in the Muzaffarnagar riots in 2013. It showed that a wedge had been driven between Hindu and Muslim farmers.

In the course of this agitation, the farmers' unions forged several strategic and structural alliances between different groups of people in the region. Though in the initial months, the mobilisation was seen largely as an agitation that was spearheaded by and restricted to Jat Sikhs, who were powerful and owned large areas of land in Punjab and Haryana, there was a realisation in the subsequent months in this prolonged fight that they would need the support of small and marginal farmers as well as agricultural workers. This was reiterated in the speeches made at the numerous *mahapanchayats* held by the farmer leaders. The construction of collective identity is very important for a movement's mobilization. Undertaken through a process of negotiation, and collective participation, the revival of the identities of the farmer and the labourer (Kumar, 2021) was a very important step towards forging new solidarities, moving away from caste and religious identities that divided the region. The farmer leaders, especially the sons of Mahendra Singh Tikait, made a conscious overture to connect with Mohammed Jaula,<sup>3</sup> who had worked closely with Tikait in building the BKU. This was an attempt to secure the support of Muslim farmers of the region.

Being anxious of their future, the Dalit labourers joined the protests under the banner of Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee (ZPSC) and Punjab Khet Mazdoor Union (PKMU). The corporate control over land would mean a loss of livelihoods, wages and even access to food (Singh, 2021). The unions felt specifically that 'the introduction of contract farming was anti-farmer and anti-labour' (Singh, 2021). 'Though their fight against the Jats was feasible within the existing structure, how would they fight the corporatisation of agriculture' (Sandhu, 2021). The dilution of the Essential Commodities Act<sup>4</sup> as a part of the farm laws would affect the food

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<sup>3</sup> Mohammed Jaula had moved away and formed his own organisation, when Rakesh and Naresh Tikait, sons of Mahendra Singh Tikait grew closer to the BJP. It is said that they even participated in the riots in 2013, where many Muslims lives were lost.

<sup>4</sup> The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act 2020 would remove cereals, pulses, oilseeds, edible oils, onions and potatoes from the list of essential commodities. It would also reduce the limit on stocks and storage of these commodities

security of the nation at large and the lower castes and classes in particular. Through a process of repeated and vigorous campaigning across the villages, Dalit organisations like PKMU<sup>5</sup> emphasised that the farm laws would adversely impact even the poor farm labourers and not just the upper caste landowners (Singh, 2021).

The farm laws were expected to have a gendered impact especially on small and marginal farmers and labourers, a large proportion of whom are women. Traditionally made invisible by caste and patriarchy, these women farmers played a significant role by participating in the movement in both direct and indirect manner. They strengthened the protests. As members of farm unions, they devoted themselves to educating people in the villages about the laws, they made their presence felt at Singhu and Tikri borders along with men and even on their own, sent rations to Tikri to sustain the farmers who were staying there for months together (Rao and Talwar 2021, Talwar, 2021). In this manner, the women prioritised and sustained the protests during this period.

The '*arhthiyas*,' another category of people, who are regarded as exploitative 'middlemen' and whose fate would become uncertain if the farm laws were implemented, occupy an ambivalent position in the rural economy. Closely connected to the *mandi*, these *arhthiyas* help the farmers in manifold ways<sup>6</sup>. Many *arhthiyas* today are Jat Sikhs and are substantial farmers too. Even though they have conflicting interests, they are considered to be 'the lifelines of the farmers in the region' (Gupta, 2021). A sense of class solidarity was forged as *arhthiyas* joined these protests demanding the repeal of farm laws.

Though intersectionality has emerged as a widely used concept in the social sciences, its presence in social movements has not been analysed substantially. The farmers mobilisation in attempting to bridge the gap between caste, class, gender and religious identities in the region, not only foregrounded multiple axes of privilege and discrimination, it also showed how intersectional interests can work to strengthen social movements. These structural alliances, though fragile and still evolving, raise hopes and make these movements distinctive especially in a region which has seen riots and polarisation as well as economic distress brought on due to the agrarian crisis. Thus following Silke Roth, we can say that 'intersectionality

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<sup>5</sup> The PKMU ran campaigns named Chetna and Jagriti (Consciousness and Wakefulness) in phases across villages.

<sup>6</sup> *Arhthiyas* help in weighing, grading and sorting of grain, they function as fertiliser and pesticide agents, as money lenders. they advance loans and help farmers transport their produce to the *mandi* and ensure that it is sold. They are people who provide general knowledge about the system.

matters for all social movements - both as an analytic and political strategy' (2021:1).

### **A non-violent inclusive civil resistance**

The farmers movement has been distinctive in its strategic use of 'principled non-violence, i.e. the moral and ethical refusal to use violence' (Nepstad 2011 : xii) to achieve its purpose. Despite attempts by the political representatives of the ruling party at the Centre, its supporters and a section of the media, to vilify and delegitimise the farmers mobilisation by labelling them as 'pro-Khalistan', 'anti national' 'Naxalites,' as 'those supported by Pakistan and China' (Khanna, 2021), the movement carried on its passive resistance in a peaceful, disciplined and democratic manner.

This was enabled due to the efforts of the farmers' unions. A prolonged process of conscientization undertaken at the local level by these organisations clarified for the average farmer different aspects of the laws, what was at stake and how it would affect them personally. The initial months of protests in Punjab was a period marked by debates and arguments - a process through which the farmers sharpened their position against the bills and crystallised their demands. A widespread sentiment that was created was that the corporates would dispossess the farmers of their land. Therefore, 'repeal or nothing' emerged as a core demand, along with a set of subsidiary demands on the extension of Minimum Support Price (MSP) to other crops as they prepared for a long battle ahead. The creation of their own parallel 'communication ecosystem' (Ranjan, 2021) consisting of newspapers, information centres, and IT cell, enabled them to challenge the dominant political narrative manufactured by the state and remain connected to the actual reality on the ground. The farmer leaders also played a very important role in channelising the emotions (concerns, fears and anger) of the farmers into a strong awareness that they have to keep their protests peaceful in order to succeed. Acts of violence and anger were eschewed along with the added realisation that 'they were being watched by the nation' (Sircar, 2020).

Though political leaders across the spectrum extended their support for the farm laws, a deliberate strategy of the farmer's organisations was to keep political leaders out of the main stage of the protest. The intention was to keep the reigns of the movement firmly in the hands of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha- a platform which had brought together nearly 400 small and large organisations of farmers. This was similar to an earlier mobilisation against the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019,

which saw a prolonged sit-in by Muslim women at Shaheen Bagh in Delhi and at different sites across the country. At the protest sites, entire villages and ‘*kunbas*’<sup>7</sup> were set up by the farmers, including community kitchens and libraries, where reading of revolutionary poetry from figures such as Pash and Sant Ram Udasi lifted their spirit, folk singers performing *ragnis* created an ethos replete with cultural symbolism. (Siwach 2021, Prashad, 2021)

What marred this communitarian ethos was the loss of farmers lives during the protests.<sup>8</sup> The experience of pain and loss did not provoke retaliation. In fact, it strengthened their resolve to fight and the adherence to a common cause created a sense of community, belongingness and self-restraint.

In this manner, on an everyday basis, the farmer’s movement used social and political power without resorting to violence or the threat of violence. It demonstrated the political effectiveness of non-violence as a form of struggle and also how civil resistance can be equally disruptive, being located outside the institutional methods of political change (Nepstad, 2011). While peasant movements like Tebhaga, Telangana and Naxalbari involved violence and invited violent state reprisal in turn, non-violent civil resistance as the farmers’ agitation has shown, has a moral power which can strike at the root of established regimes.

## Conclusion

The significance of the farmers movements lies in the fact that it allowed us to revisit the faultlines that have intensified in the local agrarian society, more specifically in the Punjab-Haryana-West UP region, due to a deepening of the processes of globalisation and its attendant consequences on a large section of people. As a social movement, the farmers’ mobilisation has led to a lot of churning within the local society, the ramifications of which were felt far beyond. In giving rise to new solidarities, enacting new forms of participation and raising significant questions, the agitation showed us how democratic values can be upheld and strengthened on an everyday basis. The mobilisation has not ended. Although the farmers movement has been successful in ensuring that the laws are withdrawn, it still remains to be seen how farmer unions fulfil their commitments to their

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<sup>7</sup> A group of extended family members

<sup>8</sup> About 600 odd farmers lost their lives either due to adverse weather, or the conditions prevalent at the site of the protests, and more recently due to a wilful attack on a peaceful jatha at Lakhimpur Kheri.

participants and bring about a gradual change in deeply entrenched agrarian relations.

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