

India: Editorial: Farmers Stoutly Resist Modi Regime's Machinations

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The iconic images of the effigies of Modi, Ambani, and Adani being burnt by protesting farmers on the Delhi-Haryana border show the depth of their rejection of the pro-corporate farm laws passed by the Modi regime in September 2020. Despite the various "concessions" and face-saving "amendments" being offered as lures by government emissaries, the leaders of the organizations leading the farmers protests have unequivocally reiterated their demand for the repeal of the 3 farm laws in toto. The godi (lapdog) media of the regime has tried hard to smear the protestors calling them "Khalistanis", "urban Naxals", "anti-national" and worse. But the farmers have stood firm and brushed aside with contempt these smear attempts of the pro-BJP elements in the mainstream media. These demonstrations are the largest protests in the country since the "Shaheen Bagh" protests against the Modi regime's anti-minority Citizenship Amendment Act last winter that were brutally crushed by the government following the pogrom against Muslims in Delhi in late February and March of this year.

It is by now hardly any secret that the economic logic promoted by Modi, following the Gujarat model of a low tax, absence of regulation and license to pollute economy he implemented as Chief Minister of that state, is crony capitalism on steroids. It is no accident that Ambani's and Adani's wealth has multiplied many-fold in Modi's tenure as Prime Minister. The fact that the protesting farmers, by and large, understand this fact well and can eloquently articulate the motivation underlying the new farm laws shows that they are by no means the unsophisticated yokels that they are portrayed as being in the mainstream media; illiterate simpletons who are being misled by "outsiders" and who do not understand or are simply unaware of the benefits Modi is going to shower on them.

There is a touching belief that the (mis-) educated Indian middle class, lured to the BJP via Hindutva ideology, has in the efficacy of the free-market capitalist system as the answer to India's economic woes. For a few decades, economic liberalization under more competent management was able to overcome the worst excesses of the license-permit Raj in specific modern sectors of the economy such as industry and services. Under the utterly incompetent management of the BJP regime, even these sectors have collapsed as economic growth has plummeted and unemployment has reached unprecedented heights.

In the agricultural sector, however, a certain amount of government intervention via the Minimum Support Price (MSP) and the Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee (APMC) market system has been deemed essential for many years. However, inadequately and inefficiently this system was implemented in practice it guaranteed in many cases a minimum income to the farmers and was responsible for India becoming self-sufficient in food grain production. Government subsidies for fertilizer and electricity (needed to power irrigation pumps) have been other features of government support for agriculture. All these are threatened by the farm laws passed stealthily by the Modi regime in the midst of the pandemic in September. The first of these laws essentially does away with

the APMC notified area and the MSP by allowing farmers to sell anywhere. The second promotes contract farming between corporates and the farmers but removes the enforcement of contracts from the purview of the courts. The third law removes many agricultural products from the category of essential commodities regulated by the government.

Withdrawal of government support will lead to further hardships for farmers and render more of them destitute and prone to loss of their only asset, land, via distress sales to the grubby corporates. Already, the high rates of suicides by farmers (over 40,000 per year) who farm outside the APMC market system suggest these rates would likely burgeon if the new laws are not repealed. The siren songs being sung by the proponents of these laws that farmers can now sell their produce anywhere in the country outside the government-regulated markets to maximize their income hold little meaning for the over 80% of Indian farmers whose average holding is between two and three acres, who barely live at the poverty level and whose ability to scour the country for better market opportunities is non-existent. Making contract farming outside of the purview of the courts serves whose interests? Does a contract between a Reliance or an Adani outfit sitting on thousands of crores with an impoverished farmer have any meaning in reality especially if any dispute cannot be taken to court? And if agricultural products are removed from the regulatory ambit of the essential commodities what is to prevent rapacious corporates from buying low, hoarding them, and manipulating prices to swell their profits?

It is clear that the protesting farmers are far from yokels, in fact they understand very well the motives of the pro-corporate pigs and their international allies drooling at the prospect of dipping their snouts in the huge food grain trade of the country. For the farmers, of course, it is a matter of survival but it has wider implications for the country as a whole too since food security is vital for the entire population although difficult to understand for some of the urban crowd dazzled by supermarkets who think foodstuffs emerge in plastic packets in air-conditioned malls. Hence the farmers have stoutly resisted all the attempts of the Modi regime to split them and buy them off with false and deceitful offers of "amendments" to the laws in multiple rounds of "talks".

May their resistance triumph and these black laws be repealed by parliament!

Aditya Nigam in a Facebook post has succinctly revealed the driving force behind the farmers agitation: *"What is striking about the farmers' ongoing 'do or die' agitation is that they are actually resisting a corporate war on society at large. It is certainly about the farmers' very existence but it is actually about much more and frankly, the farmers of the Green Revolution belt are really fighting for all of us as well. Minimum Support Price (MSP) is of course a central issue - which as Amandeep Sandhu has been pointing out most of urban India does not get - but the fact of the matter is that things have now gone way beyond the Swaminathan commission recommendations. The three agricultural ordinances are a declaration of war on Indian democracy and federalism by surreptitiously taking over a state subject (agriculture) to hand over to corporate buddies. The three ordinances together are also meant to destroy lakhs of small vendors and umpteen others who depend on the selling of agricultural produce - fruit and vegetable sellers for instance - for their livelihoods and pave the way for establishing retail chains of Reliance and such others. Here, where is the question of farmers getting MSP, if it is Adanis (who has already bought up all apple orchards in HP) and Ambanis who will be buying their produce? Moreover, with the limit of purchases and stocking and hoarding of essential commodities removed, do you need an economics professor to explain who will determine the prices of those commodities? There will only be big stores like in the US or Europe - where large chains have long eliminated the small sellers. Take the price that is tagged on to the item or do without it. So, millions of consumers (not the few consuming middle classes of metropolitan cities but even the lower middle class of the metros, and of course of small-town India, will be seriously affected. So, it is a lie to say that MSP will be guaranteed but it is equally misleading to reduce everything to MSP. The farmers are actually fighting for our collective*

survival - at this historical moment, they are the 'vanguard', if there is any."

This summary write-up captures well the essence of what the farmers are fighting for.

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