

# Farmers' protests in India turn into a tidal wave of anger

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**The unprecedented protests by the Indian peasantry against the three new laws that blatantly favour the interests of big business in agriculture win support and solidarity from across the country and take on a historically new dimension.**

The winter of discontent descended on Delhi in late November. Braving water cannons in the dead of winter, and abuses, taunts, trolls, blatant misinformation and even the outright condescension of a patronising government, they marched on until they were stopped at the gates of the national capital by a government headed by a man who, just the other day, waxed eloquent on the timeless virtues and traditions of Indian democracy.

The protests by peasants across the country, which have escalated gradually since June, when the Narendra Modi government invoked a set of ordinances that later morphed into legislation, have snowballed into a [massive tidal wave of anger](#). Along the way the scope of the movement widened, pulling in support from an ever-growing range of Indian citizens. Retired bureaucrats, youths, scientists, workers in both organised and unorganised sectors, and even sportspersons have expressed solidarity with the agitating farmers and provided material support to the agitation that has captured the imagination and the hearts and minds of Indians in a manner not seen in decades.

It is beyond doubt that the ongoing protests are the largest-ever mobilisation of the peasantry in independent India. Properly understood, one must count not just those peasants at Delhi's borders but also those who have been on the streets in villages, towns and State capitals across the country—from solidarity protests in Kerala to the mobilisation of peasants in Karnataka, Odisha and many other States. Indeed, comparisons have been made with the siege of Delhi 32 years ago by peasants led by Mahendra Singh Tikait's Bharatiya Kisan Union. That comparison is not valid for several reasons.

## **Peasant protests, then and now**

This writer was a rookie journalist in Delhi in October 1988 when Tikait's army of peasants descended on Delhi's Boat Club for about a week; in those days governments "allowed" rallies in the heart of the capital where the power elite sat. It was estimated at the time that about five lakh peasants camped at the Boat Club during the protest. Of course, the Rajiv Gandhi government tried every ruse to get the peasants vacated from the site, including playing loud music (Western) in the night. The administration blocked water and food supply in an attempt to choke the agitation. A week later, the protest ended without a formal agreement, although months later, the government ceded some ground. The ongoing protests are very different from that of 1988; the only common factor between then and now is that this time the government desperately tried to rope in Mahendra Singh's son, Rakesh Tikait, in a ham-handed attempt to split the ranks of the agitating peasants. It failed because even the younger Tikait did not wish to be seen as a backstabber.

The first striking difference between then and now is that the earlier movement, unlike the ongoing one, was mainly confined to farmers from western Uttar Pradesh. Tikait's own base was in and around Muzaffarnagar district in the region. More specifically, the protests then were mainly by Jat farmers growing sugarcane, whose primary demand was higher prices for the cane, loan waivers and concessions on the newly levied electricity and water charges.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies in and outside the government have tried to portray the ongoing movement as exclusively the concern of rich farmers and traders and as being confined to farmers from Punjab. There is little doubt that it has much wider support and solidarity from across the country. Although all sections of the peasants and agricultural workers may not be present at the Delhi borders, the agitation has been joined by different sections of the peasantry, including workers. Of course, these sections have joined for different reasons—the workers primarily because the new laws threaten livelihoods and access to foodgrains at reasonable prices and the other sections because the new laws threaten the very basis for farming as it has existed for decades. This wider representation was absent in the protests three decades ago. This wider mobilisation, and one that has taken time and effort in building, is outlined in detail in an accompanying story by Ranjini Basu.

Second, the protests of the 1980s did not draw popular support on a scale that the ongoing protests have. Third, the protests of that period did not draw the kind of brutal might of the state apparatus as they have done now. It is certain that the use of force by the BJP government in Haryana has prevented a much larger mobilisation of peasants from reaching Delhi; but even that is proving to be insufficient against the surge. Indeed, the larger mobilisation of peasants from across India—Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and parts of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh—indicate that the Tikait episode pales into insignificance compared with what is happening now.

The fourth striking difference between then and now is the presence of women. Strikingly, Tikait's later casteist slur against a Dalit Chief Minister of his time and his obvious fondness of the khap (caste panchayat) and its traditions reflected a limited role for his mobilisation, one that was severely circumscribed by the appeals of caste and a severely limited role for women—a feudal mindset, if you will. It is not as if the feudal prejudice has disappeared, it is just that the widened base of the movement and its democratisation have imposed limits on the open articulation of such rabidly sectarian views.

It is not as if these limitations, imposed by the differentiation of the peasantry, have evaporated. Instead, it is obvious that different sections of the peasants—and landless workers in the countryside, especially in Punjab—have been mobilised in waves, particularly since the disastrous demonetisation of the Indian currency, which triggered a precipitous decline in prices from which the Indian peasant has still not recovered. The incorporation of these sections—and of their specific ordering of the priority of the demands—makes the ongoing agitation stand out from peasant mobilisations in the past several decades. As the accompanying piece by Tapas Singh Modak shows, the Indian peasantry has been caught between the pincers of mounting costs and falling prices for their produce. Even a better crop, as has been the case this year, has left them losers.

A fifth standout feature of the ongoing protests—one that probably draws from all the other features mentioned earlier—is that, unlike in the past, there is no single messiah of the peasants as they have mobilised in waves since June. Recall Tikait's obviously overstated title of a messiah of the peasantry, conferred by clueless media pundits of his time, or the earlier rounds of peasant protests led by leaders such as M.D. Nanjundaswamy in Karnataka or Sharad Joshi in Maharashtra, and the difference between then and now is striking. But it would be a mistake to take the absence of a single charismatic leader as a sign of weakness. In fact, that is its strength for two reasons. First, it

reflects the strong bonds of a coalition, which draws strength from an array of protesting sections within the ranks of the peasantry. The fact that they are represented in a wide platform that has conducted the agitation is what has given it resilience. The second reason why it has turned out to be durable, much to the bewilderment of those in power, is that this kind of structured leadership in a broad coalition offers few avenues to buy off vacillating sections within the ranks of the movement.

Lastly, in terms of effect, the ongoing protests, even if prevented from reaching their intended destination in Delhi, is much bigger. For one, the Delhi of the 1980s was much smaller, nowhere near the sprawl it is today. Choking the city was a much easier task then compared with now. The widening reach of the protests now threatens to blockade the road to Jaipur.

### **The farce of negotiations**

The intransigence of the government, reflected in the farcical manner in which it treated the negotiations with farmers' groups, was based on its flawed reading of the agitation. It assumed that the protesting groups would not be able to sustain the movement for long, especially if it could exploit the fissures in the ranks of the peasantry. Of course, the Narendra Modi government's obstinate position was also dictated by its firm resolve to use the three farm laws to embed big business in Indian agriculture like never before. But the peasant organisations too were unbending in their resolve. They have, with imagination and vigour, reached out to newer sections of the Indian polity.

The government has indicated that it is willing to introduce the notion of a minimum support price (MSP) into the laws, but this obviously just will not do for the agitating peasants. It is not difficult to see why the government's offer has no takers on this side of the divide. First, the promise of an MSP without an agricultural produce market committee (APMC) where farmers can sell their produce under "neutral" conditions is totally meaningless. The fact that the cost of conducting transactions has been deliberately loaded against APMCs—because they would attract fees and other levies unlike in private trading centres—would not only make them unattractive but result in their collapse. Indeed, the widening reach of the peasant movement has been made possible by the articulation of the demand that the APMC system be expanded so that they come closer to the farms operated by small and marginal peasants; the government's offer makes no attempt to even address this. In fact, in Kerala, which does not have the APMC system, the task of procurement is done by the State government, which, through a decentralised arrangement, has organised procurement at an MSP that is set higher than that set by the Modi government. Fundamentally, no MSP system, in the absence of actual procurement that is led and directed by the state, will ensure that peasants actually get a fair deal that reflects the costs they have incurred.

The second aspect of the "offer" of the continuation of the MSP is neither here nor there. As with most things under the Modi regime, the devil is all in the intent. The credibility of the Modi regime, especially on issues pertaining to peasants, plumbed newer depths soon after it assumed office in 2014. Its track record of adhering to its own electoral pledge, for instance, of assuring farmers that they would get at least 50 per cent return on their investments in agricultural operations has been a hopeless one. It ought to be emphasised that Modi's promise to guarantee at least 50 per cent over and above all costs in their most extensive sense was only an acceptance of the farmers' demand as enshrined in the report of the National Commission on Farmers headed by the renowned agricultural scientist M.S. Swaminathan. The Commission submitted five reports between 2004 and 2006, after extensively studying the reasons for the widespread distress among farmers in India. The panel's recommendations were subsequently taken up by farmers as a minimum set of conditions that ought to be implemented by the government. Over time, as has been demonstrated in the ongoing agitation, the panel's reports, instead of being a set of usual homilies, have actually provided the credible binding glue for a wider mobilisation of the Indian peasantry. This is reflected

in the fact that significant sections of the recommendations—of which the MSP is just one—have found their way into the agenda of the protesting peasantry.

The track record of the Modi government in ensuring not just fixing the minimum floor price but its actual implementation has been an unprecedented disaster, especially since 2016. Fundamentally, its actions have had the effect of shortchanging the peasantry. It has acted as a *chatur* (clever) Baniya, a description that the Home Minister infamously attributed to Mahatma Gandhi a few years ago. This has been done by systematically understating costs, by ignoring costs in their all-encompassing sense (termed C2, as estimated by the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices) that are incurred in farming. Thus, the gap between the MSP that is set and the actual all-encompassing costs that the peasant has incurred has widened significantly during the Modi years. Thus, for paddy, the difference between the MSP and a less comprehensive account of costs (that includes imputed costs for family labour but not imputed rent and interest on owned land and capital) is higher than the MSP set for the current kharif by about 50 per cent. But once the sum of all costs is considered, the gain drops to a mere 12 per cent.

The difference between what the government has offered as MSP and the actual costs incurred by peasants is very large for most crops for which an MSP has been set. Mind you, even the presence of an MSP does not guarantee the farmer even the minimum return that the government has promised. Actual procurement for most crops, barring wheat and paddy, is very limited geographically, with the bulk of the Central procurement happening in Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh; in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Odisha, paddy is procured by the State governments in order to feed their own public distribution channels.

A third reason why the offer to incorporate an MSP-like feature into the legislation lacks credibility arises from the Modi regime's track record. It may well be that the MSP would be mentioned in the Acts, but who will implement it? What if the Centre reins in the Food Corporation of India (FCI), thereby preventing procurement operations? It is quite likely that the States, especially in the aftermath of COVID-19, lack the resources to undertake procurement operations on the scale the FCI now does. In effect, the Centre seems to have cynically passed on the burden to the States, knowing full well what is in store. This is like rubbing salt into the wounds of the States; after legislating on agriculture—clearly lying within the legislative domain of the States—the Centre would now be passing on the additional burden as well.

### **The Modi government's game plan**

*Frontline's* extensive coverage of the [issues posed by the rise of big business in retail in 2007](#) focussed on the attempts by large industrial houses to abridge the supply chain in order to extract more profits. The idea was to shorten and aggregate the extremely fragmented supply chain into a more compact and organised unit. The wave of investments that followed—not just by India's seasoned business houses such as the Ambanis, the Tatas and the Birlas, but also the likes of the Rahejas, the RPG Group and even fresh entrants like the Future Group—was aimed at achieving this. Notice that most of these chains had a fairly intense grocery-focus, which was expected to act as a stabilising source of revenue compared with other avenues in retail like white goods or clothing. These investments were made in an attempt to establish retail chains that were fed by aggregated purchases that, hopefully, would generate profits because of the cost savings arising from aggregated purchases of produce from agricultural producers.

It is evident that this strategy has largely failed, as indicated by the subsequent rollback of Reliance's fruits and vegetable retail chain and a string of collapses of retail chains, including the spectacular collapse of the Future Group, whose chief, Kishore Biyani, just a decade ago, was the poster child for Indian retail. In hindsight, this strategy failed for several reasons, and chief among

them was the fact that the task of abridging the marketing channel, without removing the official channels such as the APMC mandi, was proving to be a mountain too high to surmount. In short, dismantling the APMC system was seen as a prerequisite for big business' plans for retail. It has become clear that the failure of big business in Indian retail arose from its inability to cost-effectively mop up fragmented production sourced from scattered small farms in the Indian countryside.

Three interconnected factors needed to be achieved if big business had to overcome this hurdle, all of which hinge on the implementation of the three new farm laws across the country. The first is that large-scale investments—much larger than Indian corporates had dared to imagine in the earlier, ill-fated, round—were needed in order to establish separate supply chains. Secondly, however, if this was to happen, investors needed iron-clad assurances that they would enjoy oligopolistic control over procurement channels. Obviously, the large investments in building scaled-up supply channels would not happen without protection of profits. There is also a palpable fear among the peasantry that the new law on contract farming may lead to greater direct forays by corporate entities into agriculture and that it would open the floodgates for new lease laws that would result in the dispossession of the peasantry.

The third feature of the new farm laws—and one that directly connects the ongoing agitation to the interests of Indians at large—is that all these arrangements on the supply side would be futile without big retail having total control over the distribution chain. This is why the fear that the abandonment of the MSP regime and the emasculation of the APMC mandi system would directly affect Indian food security is not an idle one. “What is the point of controlling the procurement channels if final profits at the retail end are not available?” is the reasoning of big business.

The salience of the Indian public distribution system (PDS) for delivering foodgrains to people is highlighted by developments during the ongoing pandemic. It is remarkable that the PDS' ability to deliver a minimum quantity of foodgrains (and a little of the pulses) has been the only redeeming feature of the Modi government's response to the pandemic. Reports and surveys have shown that families in rural areas have, by and large, managed to access some quantities of foodstuffs from this channel, at least during the worst period of the pandemic—the lockdown. One fears what may have happened if this had not been in place.

If the intentions of the Modi regime are any indicator, one can imagine what may happen to the PDS over time, if not immediately. Under the sway of thinking that goes in the name of Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT), and the wondrous possibilities offered by the use of Aadhaar, it is likely that the entire business of actually delivering foodstuffs to people will be abandoned. But transferring money—even if and when it actually reaches the intended beneficiary—is certainly not the same as ensuring that food actually reaches the plate. If prices turn volatile most beneficiaries will be shortchanged as the amounts transferred into their accounts buy less and less of the foodstuffs they are supposed to get. Moreover, as the widely documented excesses of the Aadhaar scheme have shown, many would be abandoned beyond the pale of any system that guarantees a minimum quantity of food for India's poorest. One shudders to imagine the consequences for India's hungry; in the comity of nations, India ranks 102 among 117 countries in the recently released Global Hunger Index.

But even this is just one aspect of what is in store. The consequences for food inflation appear frightening once such a regime takes over. The presence of the PDS has a dampening effect on food prices in general. Moreover, the presence of large grain stocks in the hands of the government acts as an anchor on inflationary expectations. This is because those who can hoard or speculate on grain prices have to currently worry about the possibility of releases from stocks that can thwart such expectations from being actually realised. Once the government does not procure, how will it in any

case have the stocks to deter price surges? This is the reason why the three pieces of legislation have to be seen as a unified whole. The peasantry has seen this, and it has in the process educated others about the dangers of pursuing the path the government has chosen.

### **Why uniting the peasant is so difficult**

The Indian peasantry is notoriously difficult to unite. In fact, the notion of a “farmer” is a caricature of the Indian peasantry. At the bottom of the socio-economic structure lies the agricultural worker who owns little or no land. Then there are peasants who own some land, but not enough to eke out a living and are thus dependent on work elsewhere. Then there are the larger peasants who own some more land, and others who have enough to not have to work, until one reaches the top of the ladder where the owner of the land does not work at all on the land. Clearly, this structure is extremely lopsided, with most of the Indian peasantry at the bottom of this pyramid. Of course, complicating this picture further is the element of caste that obscures these economic relationships in ways that prevent the building of solidarity that is based on shared livelihoods.

It is evident that even the richer sections of the peasantry fear what is in store. Sections of the rural elite, whose power, prestige and economic clout still come from the land they have control over, may have fancied their chances of climbing onto the supply chain bandwagon, acting as brokers or aggregators for the larger chains dealing in agricultural produce. But there are contradictions that stare them in the face. Since the three laws’ fundamental purpose is to stifle farm gate prices of agricultural produce—while ensuring no government control over retail channels—the profitability from farming is destined to be hit. Moreover, the extreme volatility that prices would be subjected to in the absence of state procurement operations would subject their incomes to oscillate wildly. It is quite possible that this segment of the rural elite fears losing social and economic control that flows from its possession of land. The insecurity among even these sections possibly explains why the ongoing protest movement has—despite the vacillations within the ranks of the more well-endowed—incorporated some of the concerns and demands of those lower down the socio-economic hierarchy.

There is little doubt that the peasant mobilisations across the country have been historic. There is something poignant in the way the peasant movement has incorporated the findings of a commission headed by India’s best known agricultural scientist as part of its progressive agenda. Just as poignant was the recent refusal of an official award by Dr Varinderpal Singh. Speaking on stage politely, but with dignity, the soil scientist declined the award presented by Union Minister of Chemicals and Fertilizers D.V. Sadananda Gowda. In a letter to Modi, Varinderpal Singh said his conscience prevented him from accepting an award at a time when the government was causing “unnecessary pains” to farmers. Perhaps it is emblematic of a moment when the peasant’s cause has transcended the narrow confines of the sectarian agenda that has dominated politics in the past six years. The remarkable resolve with which these protests have happened, against huge odds, is the defining feature of the ongoing protests. Sections of the intelligentsia ask: what if this movement fails? What would they have achieved in that case? Such a line of questioning approaches the notion of success or failure in binary terms: that one can only win or lose, not seeing such battles as a continuum of struggles in which one may lose a particular battle, but still achieve “success” in the process.

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