

# Peasant Struggles in India, a Feminist Perspective

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## **Archana Prasad spoke with Capire about women's work and lives in India and the struggles against corporate power and right-wing policies**

Archana Prasad is a professor at the Centre for Informal Sector & Labour Studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University and also part of the [All India Democratic Women's Association](#), founded in 1981 by women leaders who were part of communist organisations. One of the largest women organisations in the country with around 10 million members, the AIDWA gives attention to issues related to violence, agriculture and all of the things that concern women's lives. And, in connexion with historical strategies of women in leftist organisations and communist parties, they also act to put pressure on mass movements, to strengthen the struggle against patriarchal capitalism and to confront patriarchy reconfiguration in the social structures of the contexts they are embedded in.

Since November 2020, India's peasants are protesting in New Delhi against three anti-farmers and pro-corporate laws passed by the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), represented in the government by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The undemocratic way that these laws were pushed through parliament and the effect that these laws can have on farmers' lives are leading people on a historical movement for their rights of land, work and fair market. The last big demonstration happened on India's Republic Day, January 26<sup>th</sup>, with [tens of thousands of farmers on tractors](#), followed by international solidarity and support (#ShineOnIndiaFarmers). The peaceful parade was marked by police brutality and one protester was killed amid the unrest. A week before, on January 18<sup>th</sup>, [women went to protests massively on Women's Farmers Day](#).

Talking to Capire, Archana discussed women's work and the participation in the farmers' strikes, the life before and after the pandemic and the struggles against the neoliberal government of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Check the interview below.

**The whole world is following the peasant and farmers' strikes and mobilizations in India. Especially the great mobilization of women on the 18<sup>th</sup> called our attention. Could you briefly tell us about the advances and political challenges of farmers struggles, from the women's perspective?**

This wave of protests began about three years ago with the [Long March](#), from Korat village in Maharashtra to Mumbai, in which more than half of the participants were women. And why are women participating so much in peasants' movements even when the movement itself tends to be gender blind? There are important points to take into account. In 2009, on the [National Commission of Women](#), it was formed a committee to build policies for women farmers. I was one of the members of that committee. On that occasion we defined the woman farmer as someone who does paid and unpaid work, on the field and off the field. Her work is related to social reproduction, but is also related to commodities production in agriculture. Actually, it is related to all sectors, whether is farming, whether is animal husbandry, whether is fishery, whether is work produced on forests.

Most of the farmers in India are small and marginal farmers with less than one hectare of land. 70% of them own 0.5 of one hectare of land. In many cases the man works out in seasonal work. Even before neoliberalism men of the family migrated for work outside for three to five months of the year while the women would be in the villages maintaining the farm. So the definitions of female housework can be that the woman takes care not only of the domestic labour, but also of the farm work for long periods of the year. But women have no rights to the land, they are not seen as farmers, they are seen as either paid farm workers or as someone who lives on the farm and does farm work as a part of her unpaid family duties. Hence there is no recognition of women as farmers since they do not have land rights; that is why one of the movement slogans has been "I'm also a farmer".

Women's struggle for land has been very important over the years and one of our oldest demands is that the land should be registered in the name of both husband and wife. There should be joint titles to the land. Because as feminists we know that inheritance becomes one of the mechanisms for the oppression of women. Further, there are around 75 million families who live in small farms and, besides farming, their supplementary income comes from the production of milk done mostly by women as unpaid work; about 6-10 million women also do dairy farming as paid work: surplus produce from both these is sold to local markets. What we have recently is that big corporations are penetrating the animal husbandry sector and dairy farming and this process will be intensified with these black laws; it will even intensify greater operation of women workers in fishing and other allied sectors. Further, the laws will also destroy an already weakened public distribution system and threaten food security.

All this is taking place in a context when the country has been facing an agricultural crisis for three decades after the Indian agricultural market was linked to the world market. And more than 400 thousand farmers have committed suicide. All these 400 thousand families have become female headed and these women had to work and take care of their families; women have inherited debts and have no land rights and the government has not taken any step for either loan waivers or rehabilitation of the widows of these farmers. With farm laws, more women are likely to face the same situation.

**We understand that these mobilizations are part of a more general resistance to the Modi government, and that it has a background in other mobilizations that have also had a strong presence and protagonism of women. Could you give us an overview of these mobilizations?**

What does Modi represent? He is the third generation of neoliberalism reforms, but it's not because of Modi being in the government that we are protesting. We were protesting against neoliberalism even when Modi wasn't there. Modi has brought the neoliberalism reforms into a totally political shift. We are moving from a simple form of neoliberalism to chronic corporate capitalism which is completely dominating our political system as well as the present-day government whose policies of crony capitalism are well known. The second thing is that women were getting social welfare till the early 90s. The State had a reformist agenda. It wanted to have anti-dowry laws, because of women struggles, with no doubt.

We were the ones who wanted the rights for ourselves. We know that most of the women, more than 90% of paid women workers, are in informal labour. Even if they are doing manufacturing work, it's invisible work; therefore, we have been asking for recognition for women as workers, whether is paid domestic work or whether is manufacturing work. So women's work in rural and urban areas are linked together. With neoliberalism, social welfare measures have also been constrained.

We support women to come out and become organised, because they are not even having the

nutritional, health or educational support that they need. Instead, right-wing conservative institutions have taken over and their policies have led to increase in trafficking and violence. They want to keep women in the home while feminist movements take women outside of their houses so we can share the experience and organise the struggles with each other. Conservatives want women to work from home. They state that technology enables women to work from home for sake of convenience; but when they do so they get more isolated and face greater patriarchal oppression. Because of that we think that working at a workplace can become liberating for women. Even though gender pay gaps are very high, both in agriculture and outside agriculture.

On top of that, the Modi government is making Hindu nationalism and traditions as role models for young people which is a totally patriarchal ideology. What we have is a social counter-revolution taking place. There has been a big increase of rape cases in the last few months and chief ministers from the right-wing parties like Yogi Adityanath and Shivraj Chauhan, say that this is some sort of conspiracy; if someone tries to investigate these cases, they put behind bars. It has been a really big challenge. In 2013 there was a big case of rape in New Delhi, which created a big movement. The women's organisations forced the then ruling dispensation to make a Commission to change the legal framework for tackling increasing violence against women. Before that the Domestic Violence Act was enacted by the Parliament in 2005 due to the pressure of the women's movement. What I'm trying to say is that all of these gains are under attack.

### **How can we understand the links between capitalism, Hindu nationalism and women's oppression in India?**

We have had patriarchal-capitalism since the early 1950s, but this was not aligned with neoconservatism or Hindu fundamentalism or religious fundamentalism. All religions and castes have their own patriarchy, but when capitalism and fundamentalism come together, we have a really highly lethal combination. These two are the responsible for the counter revolution I was talking about. That's why it is important to link secularism with issues concerning women's rights. Further fight against the caste system is linked to women's rights. If you are a woman from an oppressed caste, then you are doubly oppressed.

Today we have changes in citizenship laws taking place. On a religious basis, this is changing the fundamental character of the nation. 60% of people whose names were not on the citizen list were women because they do not have proper papers or documents that could prove their information, like the date of birth of their parents. Some of them were born before partition in East Pakistan. Citizenship becomes based on documentary proof, but people just don't have these documents. That is why women fight against that. Women are protesting not because they are anti-Modi himself, it is because of what is being taken by the Modi government. In the past when something happened that affected women's life, they could go out and protest. Today, it is almost like a dictatorship. The social basis of the government lies in corporations and these neoconservative forces and not in people.

### **Two themes call our attention when we look at the situation of women in India: violence and challenges related to work and economic autonomy. In what way has the pandemic highlighted or deepened these issues in the daily lives of women?**

In May 2020 a survey by the All India Democratic Women's Association on domestic workers found that more than 65% of the women lost their jobs because they were working in the informal sector. Since their husbands were also working in the informal sector there was a loss of family income. The "stay-at-home" policies and the lockdown have increased the unpaid work for women. It also resulted in higher domestic violence, for which we don't have proper numbers because the State refuses to record this data. Prior to the pandemic, India had the lowest work participation rate of

women in the last maybe 40 years, to around 17.4 percent. Around three to six million women got pushed out of the labour market.

In the movement we have a lot to say about unpaid work and we want recognition of all work of women through either fair wages or social protection. If this happens it will be the death of the patriarchal family, as women will be able to go out and work with dignity and also control their own earnings. Instead, what we have is rising domestic violence, caste violence and religious violence against women without access to dignified paid work. Further, malnutrition is going up in the last two years, and the most impacted are women and children. Women malnutrition has gone up to 65%.

The pandemic brought a huge food crisis. We have been asking for free food for women and their families for six months, we have also been demanding that women and their families should get 15 thousand rupees per month, for support for loss of income. Along with this we are demanding and agitating for justice for women and intervening in gruesome suppression of inter-faith marriages, rising violence; we have been demanding accountability of the government and police in these matters. The government is trying to reverse our gains in the name of the pandemic, and we have to fight this trend.

**You gave very good information about what is going on for women in India and we know that right now everything is linked to the pandemic. There is no way to flee from this subject. So, about the farmers strikes and the demands for a better approach to the problems deepened by the pandemic, what are the next steps for the struggles?**

One thing is certain: while our long-term task is to build a broad-based movement against patriarchy and patriarchal authority, we are also fighting against the corporatization of our agricultural system and the labour market flexibility that is being introduced in the name of convenience. These two measures have to be fought in alliance with the rest of the peasant and working-class organisations. Our fight for our own rights in agriculture will be contingent upon our fight against corporatization of agriculture. We know already that corporate farming exists, and the contracts of work often result in forced labour of women. For example, in the State of Prime Minister Modi [Gujarat], Monsanto was promoted through Operation Sunshine and the contractors forced women into labour from nearby states. And those women were working in forced-labour conditions and they were also often assaulted sexually. Violence against women and workers oppression are two things that are totally linked. We got to fight!

Second, we also believe that issues related to sexuality are also linked to these other issues. We don't believe that sexuality is an autonomous subject. There are many organisations that do not agree with us but certainly the socialist feminist organisations would agree with us. For us the main struggle is to make social reproduction easier, either through universal social protection or through socialization of social reproduction itself by democratisation of the household itself. For example, why should a woman be solely responsible for raising a child? It is a public responsibility. After all, children growing up are the future of the economy, the State and the politics. But what we call socialization and redistribution of care work cannot happen within the household alone—patriarchal division of labour also exists in relationship with class and other social relations. Thus the manifestation of patriarchy is different for different classes of women.

Class consciousness is very important for the feminist movement, I think. And maybe that is what distinguishes us from some other feminist organisations. But despite these differences we need to find common ground with other mass and autonomous women's organisations to expand our struggles. We have to come together to give that big push because corporate power is making the rules of the game and we have to change that. It is going to be quite difficult, but we need to fight

not only Modi but also corporate power which is backed by neoconservative and fundamentalist forces today.

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