

India: What We Can Learn from the Farmers' Protests

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***Narendra Modi's** government hurriedly passed three agricultural [laws](#) in September, without [allowing](#) for public consultation or [parliamentary](#) scrutiny.*

The “farm laws” introduce deregulation and facilitate large corporations into the sector with the stated intent of “modernising systems” and “helping farmers realise better prices”.

The laws weaken state control over pricing and sale of food crops by allowing corporate retailers to directly buy from and enter into pre-agreed contracts with farmers, bypassing government marketing boards set up to ensure fair prices. They deregulate crop storage by allowing private traders to stockpile and removing restrictions meant to avoid speculation and inflation.

Farmers' agitation against the three anti-farmer and pro-corporation laws [crossed](#) the 100-day mark in early March. In a definitive moment of the resistance, when the Modi government blocked peaceful marches to New Delhi by digging trenches and fixing nails and concertina wires, farmers responded by [planting](#) flowers and sowing crops, demonstrating a firm resilience in the face of repression.

The movement is defined by caste, gender and class solidarities. It has made a global impression, with [celebrities](#) like Rihanna and climate activist Greta Thunberg extending their support. International protests supporting the movement have been [led](#) by the Punjabi Sikh community in Canada, the United States, Britain, Australia and New Zealand.

Through these various dynamics, the anti-farm-laws protests have set new milestones for social movement politics in India.

Farmers versus farm laws

The farm laws could pave the way for the dismantling of government agricultural markets, under which state-based marketing boards purchase surplus wheat and rice produce from farmers at guaranteed minimum support prices (MSPs).

The laws ignore the [long history](#) of well-knit relations between farmers and commission agents or small private traders. They assume that large corporations will ensure better prices especially for small farmers – who cultivate two hectares or less and make up 85% of the farming economy — by allowing them to sell their produce directly.

But [studies](#) from the state of Bihar where government markets were scrapped in the mid-2000s indicate that, “farmers (were) left at the mercy of traders who unscrupulously fix(ed) lower prices for agricultural produce”.

Inadequate market facilities and institutional arrangements resulted in low price realisations and price instabilities under free-marketisation in Bihar and [led](#) to farmers’ distress.

The current laws also [disable](#) rights to legal recourse. These so-called reforms can disproportionately [disadvantage](#) the small farmers they purport to support, by exposing them to price fluctuations, exploitation by large retailers too powerful to [bargain](#) with, and leaving them without the ability or means to seek justice.

Lastly, the laws pose a [risk to federalism](#) as enshrined in the Constitution.

In response, more than 400 local, state and national farmers’ and agricultural workers’ unions have [unanimously demanded](#) the Modi government repeal the three laws, set profitable MSPs on all crops, and legally guarantee that government markets and procurement from farmers at set MSPs will continue.

Protests

While opposition has come from across India, Punjab and Haryana — two northern states with a majority farming-dependent rural population, where well-established government markets have ensured [sustainable](#) crop prices since the Green Revolution in the 1970s — have become the face of the anti-farm-laws protests.

After three months of localised opposition and failed negotiations with the centre, farmers escalated their resistance through a *Dilli Chalo* (March to Delhi) [campaign](#) last November, under the umbrella of the United Farmers’ Front.

Thousands of protestors stayed in makeshift camps fashioned from tents and parked tractors at border points to Delhi — at Singhu, Tikri and Ghazipur. Through the intensifying winter, these previously unheard of locations came to be known as sites of [historic resistance](#) to neoliberalism.

The participation of socio-economically marginalised groups in the protests — such as landless *Dalits* (lower caste) whose livelihoods depend on casual labour in government markets — indicates that historic caste and power conflicts are [dissolving](#) and various agrarian communities are forging common ground in response to sweeping neoliberalisation.

The [prominence](#) of women (considered agriculture’s invisible workforce) and Indigenous [Adivasi peasants](#) in protests throughout India add other critical dimensions to the movement’s intersectionality.

Yet another historic dimension is characterised by the movement’s unity with industrial workers protesting the Modi government’s [new labour codes](#) introduced to facilitate ease of

business. The new codes were also [controversially legislated](#) around the same time as the farm laws.

Coinciding with India's Constitution Day, on November 26, workers unions joined farmers and agricultural workers in the world's [biggest](#) general strike: across India more than 250 million workers and millions of farmers protested both sets of laws in a demonstration of *Kisan Mazdoor Ekta* (farmer-worker unity).

The strikes also raised [concerns](#) around rising unemployment and prices and the lack of income-support in a sinking Indian economy. This was followed by another joint national strike on December 8.

The national anti-farm-laws movement has grown in size and significance since then. Taking into account the governments' crackdown on dissent, on December 10, World Human Rights Day, farmers called for the [release](#) of all civil rights activists, academics, lawyers and intellectuals imprisoned on trumped-up charges under [draconian](#) laws.

Adani

Farmers confronted crony capitalism by labelling them "Adani and Ambani laws" after India's richest industrialists close to Modi and called for a [boycott](#) of their products.

The Adani Group in particular is [poised](#) to control the market once the laws take effect.

The Supreme Court made an [uncharacteristic](#) intervention in January, designed to thwart the movement. Instead of ruling on the laws' constitutional validity, it suspended the implementation of the farm laws and attempted to mediate the dispute. Farmers rejected the Supreme Court's process outright.

On January 26, Indian Republic Day, farmers symbolically [reclaimed democracy](#) by staging an alternative tractor parade to the national capital.

Their innumerable protests used well-worn tactics of peaceful resistance such as rail and road blockades and *Chakka Jam* where [convoys](#) of tractors blocked highways.

A prominent youth leadership [emerged](#) from the protests and proved crucial in forging anti-caste and farmer-worker solidarity. Observers described the sites of Ghazipur, Tikri and Singhu as a "festival of democracy" [reminiscent](#) of the anti-Citizenship Amendment-Act (anti-CAA) movement in 2019 at Shaheen Bagh in east Delhi (and around India).

These sites witnessed a [flourishing](#) of revolutionary songs, dance and Punjabi poetry. Protesters [built](#) makeshift libraries, a school, gym and kitchens where they cooked *Langar* community meals for hundreds daily. Foot [massages](#) and [yoga sessions](#) were offered for weary protesters.

The Sikh community that [dominates](#) Punjab's farming landscape has a proud history of [land resistance](#). The community is also defined by a [history](#) of religious oppression and resistance; the most recent anti-Sikh pogrom following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984 still brings [memories](#) of terror and vulnerability.

Their past experiences have shaped an active [distaste](#) for the Modi government's Hindu nationalist project. The passing of blatantly pro-corporate laws by a Hindu-nationalist

government triggered political alarm bells and [compelled](#) the Sikh farming community to fight for their livelihoods and future.

Overseas, Sikhs who retain strong ties to their lands and families in Punjab supported the Indian movement by [urging](#) their respective governments to speak out and leading [protests](#) to draw global attention.

In Canada, where the Sikh community is politically influential, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau [supported](#) the peaceful Indian resistance and expressed concern over the use of water cannons, tear gas and other violent tactics to restrain marching farmers.

Crackdown

By February, farm leaders had met with the Modi government eleven times but had still [not been able](#) to get their demand for a repeal of the laws accepted. By this time the government started a civil society wide crackdown [centred](#) on the anti-farm-laws mobilisation.

Following the disruptive hoisting of the Nishan Sahib (Sikh) flag by some groups at India's Republic Day celebrations on January 26 and the ensuing clashes with the police — which some farm leaders have called a [conspiracy](#) designed to smear their peaceful actions — more than 200 farmers, journalists and activists were [detained](#) and several [charged](#) under anti-terrorism and sedition laws. Water, electricity and Internet were [cut off](#) at protest sites, leaving thousands stranded without basic essentials.

The government went on the offensive in a bid to silence international and social media support for the farmers. Twitter, which took a tough stand against Donald Trump, [struggled](#) between defending free speech and complying with an Indian government [order](#) to block accounts sympathetic to the protests.

It [eventually](#) suspended more than 500 accounts, but refused to block those belonging to media, journalists, activists and politicians.

The government's propaganda machinery alleged that the protesters were acting under the [influence](#) of India's rival Pakistan and pro-Khalistan (separatist) Sikh organisations [based](#) overseas. It raised the bogey of the "foreign hand" by claiming that a social media [tool kit](#) that Thunberg tweeted while supporting the farmers was an international conspiracy to create disharmony in India.

While police arrested young activists for [merely](#) distributing the toolkit, Modi criticised overseas activists and [warned](#) against the "Foreign Destructive Ideology".

But such attacks only served to strengthen support for the movement. The pleas of farm leaders following the attacks [generated](#) fresh mass meetings and new political solidarity in North India.

Globally, celebrities and activists took to [twitter](#) to express solidarity. Global appeals for justice were made for youth activists [tortured](#) in custody for protesting the farm laws and those arrested for circulating the toolkit. These attacks brought international political criticism, generating a [debate](#) in the British Parliament on press freedom and protesters' safety in India.

In Australia, while the Scott Morrison government maintained a [selective silence](#) on India's plummeting democratic condition, opposition [Labor](#) and [Green](#) parliamentarians spoke against the Indian state's violence against democratic dissent.

Social commentators [pointed out](#) that the Modi government had finally encountered a peoples' resistance it could not suppress with strongarm tactics, or discredit with its propaganda machinery that [includes](#) a large section of the mainstream media.

Lessons

This movement reflects a [political turn](#) through the bridging of historic class, caste and gender divisions; it indicates rising global concern for people's struggles in India; and finally, the manner in which the Indian government passed the farm laws and suppressed dissent serves as a reminder of how neoliberalism can compromise India's democratic process.

These protests offer lessons for agrarian movements resisting marketisation worldwide. The movement's dynamics help in understanding the ramifications of free-marketisation under high social and economic inequality, and how affected communities combine age-old tools of resistance with solidarity to sustain peaceful and steadfast protests against the new economic order.

India's "dance of democracy" around neoliberalisation is not new. Since the early 1990s, affected peoples' movements have resisted sweeping market reforms across various sectors that threatened their lands and livelihoods, often compelling governments to pass ameliorative legislation.

Farmers' long marches in 2018 and 2019 [demanded](#) improvements in support prices for crops, drought relief and land rights. The current movement continues and surpasses the previous protests in significance.

This year, the Modi government pushed through several controversial market [reforms](#) as "COVID recovery measures", while civil society's ability to democratically dissent was curtailed under lockdown restrictions.

The extent and persistence of the farmers' mobilisation demonstrates what is at stake for the millions who feed the nation, and ultimately for food security.

Modi's systematic [attack](#) on human rights and religious freedom is also not lost on the world. The movement has come to signify a democratic resistance to crony capitalism, communalism and authoritarianism.

With the protests now in their fifth month, farmers are bracing for a scorching summer after facing a harsh winter that claimed more than 200 lives. The world can continue to show support by following their ongoing struggle for justice.

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Featured image: Indian farmers have been protesting for more than five months against new laws favouring big agribusiness. Photo: Wikimedia Commons CC0 1.0

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