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# Farmer's Protest 2020: Play, Pause, Stop, Rewind

## **ABSTRACT**

The article investigates the farmer's protest in India (2020-21) against the Indian Agricultural Act of 2020. It focuses on the roles of organisations such as trade unions and civil societies that took part in the protest in 2020-21 beyond partisan politics, the active participation of the women and Dalit farmers, and the counter narratives created by citizen journalism through social media platforms against sustained pro-state discourses from mainstream media. It studies the successes and limitations of the movement in the context of the nature of contemporary Indian politics and its future course.

## **KEYWORDS**

Farmers' protest in India 2020-21  
Minimum Support Price (MSP)  
Strike  
Indian Agricultural Act of 2020

## PLAY: SITUATING THE STRIKE

The dusty movie projector whirrs into action, the old VCR engulfs the videotape, the taciturn keys of the keypad respond ever so quietly. The screen lights up as we sit back and observe the Framers' Protest of 2020 yet again. The first version of this paper was presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> International Association of Strikes and Social Conflicts (IASSC) Conference in Cape Town, 5-7 February 2024, in a paper titled "Farmers' Protest and Indian Agricultural Act of 2020: Trials, Tribulations, and Triumphs of Peasant Movement in the 21st Century". That presentation focused primarily on the farmers' protest in India that took place from September 2020 to November 2021. As we were presenting the paper, the farmers were assembling for a second protest to march towards Delhi on 13 February 2024, demanding legal assurance of the Minimum Support Price (MSP)<sup>1</sup> that had not been fulfilled by the government since the first protest that led to the repeal of the three Farm Acts. However, this second protest met with a swift and brutal end, unlike the previous one held in 2020-21, as the state took no chance this time with their fellow citizens. Farmers could not reach Delhi and were stopped at the Shambhu border<sup>2</sup>. The protest continues at the border while we write this paper.

On 16 March 2024, the Election Commission of India declared the dates for the general elections to be held in seven phases from 19 April to 1 June, 2024, with the result due on 4 June, 2024, a scrupulous dance of democracy to elect the central government. During the election campaign, the major issues for the opposition were unemployment, inflation, economic inequality, caste discrimination, women's safety, and MSP. The farmers' strike, one may extrapolate, is symptomatic of the unholy alliance of crony capitalism and the populist politics of *Hindutva*<sup>3</sup> endorsed by the ruling regime under the rubric of a personality-cult formation sited in the image of the prime minister of India, Narendra Modi. The year-long farmer's protest of 2020 may well prove to be the watershed moment in the political history of India in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that fundamentally changed dynamics of the Indian society. The Government of India enacted the Indian Agricultural Act 2020 on 27 September 2020. It comprised of three acts: Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act 2020 allows multinational corporations to indulge in indiscriminate procurement, trading, e-commerce and use of agricultural produce without any safety net for farmers or regulatory mechanism from the state governments. The Farmers' (Endowment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services 2020 facilitates farmers entering into agreements with corporations and resolving disputes among parties. The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act 2020 removes agricultural produce like food grains and edible oils from a list of essential items allowing indiscriminate stock piling and manipulation of prices in open market. The three acts commonly referred to as Farm Acts,

propagated the free-market ethos where individual farmers can enter into agreements with big businesses to potentially earn more profit. Moreover, the view widely circulated in mainstream media was that both the corporations and the farmers would be potentially well off with deregulation of markets and abolition of the bureaucracy's red tape-ism. On the other hand, a substantial number of big and small farmers, especially from North India, protested against the acts as they deemed them draconian acts that robbed the farmers of their safety net for market forces with the state being the regulatory body. The protest started on a local scale, predominantly with farmers from Punjab and Haryana. It soon gained pan-Indian and global support that forced the government to repeal the farm laws after a year of incessant struggle.

In September 2020, the farmers marched to Delhi to voice their demands against the three Farm Acts. They were stopped on the road to their nation's capital at Singhu, Ghazipur and Tikri. Barricades were built as the *borders* of the states of Haryana and Punjab took new meanings while the state began redefining its citizens (Thandi, 2024, pp. 6-9). The farmers left their farms unattended to be on the road, driven by the dire need to assemble and protest, but they never left the land. They settled on the *borders*, tents went up, so too the community kitchens, the tractors and motorbikes punctured the cacophony of slogans, songs, debates, laughter, sweat, blood, tears and deaths as the biting cold winds of northern India raged over the makeshift tenements and the Covid pandemic loomed large. As always, they toiled, they persevered, they survived, and they triumphed knowing all the while that only the struggle is permanent and triumphs are few and far between, always momentary, always wanting. Their voices were stifled and turned on their heads by the robust propaganda machinery of the state. They responded by closing their *borders* to partisan politics and electoral gains. The internet was poor and so were the mobile communications. The smart phones still fired, videos were shared, songs were sung, and ground reportage by citizen journalists reached new heights of participatory journalism.

This paper focuses on the roles of organisations beyond partisan politics, the active participation of the women and Dalit farmers, and the counter narratives created by citizen journalism through social media platforms against sustained pro-state discourses by mainstream media. The paper argues that the nature of peasants' struggles in India has changed its course in neoliberal times from the ideologically driven movements under the aegis of mainstream political parties since the 1960s to a unique brand of populism that questions the traditional Marxist notions of sustained struggles of the working class and that the farmers' protests (both 2020-21 and 2024) directly affected the result of India's general election in 2024.

1 The Minimum Support Price (MSP) is a government-set price which aims to safeguard farmers against sudden declines in market prices for agricultural produce. Announced at the beginning of each sowing season, the MSP covers twenty-three crops in total (seven grains, five pulses, seven oilseeds and four cash crops) and is determined based on recommendations from the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP). This policy plays a crucial role in ensuring that farmers receive a minimum assured return on their produce, protecting them from the exploitation of middlemen and the unpredictability of market conditions. The MSP serves as a key instrument in supporting agricultural stability and farmer welfare in India (Commission for Agricultural Costs & Prices, Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, Government of India, <https://cacp.da.gov.in/content.aspx?pid=32>, accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2024).

2 Shambhu border is located between Punjab and Haryana, near the Chandigarh-Delhi Highway (NH-44).

3 Hindutva is a right-wing ethno-nationalist ideology that frames India's cultural identity through the lens of Hinduism, with the aim of transforming India into an explicitly Hindu nation-state. The concept was first articulated in the early 1920s by Indian nationalist leader Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. Today, Hindutva is mostly associated with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a major political party in India, and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist paramilitary group. Proponents of Hindutva, known as Hindutvavadis (the supporters of Hindutva ideology), claim to represent India's large Hindu majority, which comprised 79.8% of the population in the 2011 census, with 14.2% identifying as Muslim, and the remainder consisting of Christians, Sikhs, and others. Hindutvavadis seek to reinterpret the secularism enshrined in the Indian constitution to prioritize Hindu rights. Although often conflated with Hinduism, Hindutva is distinct from the religious faith. Savarkar's original conception of Hindutva defined it as an ethnic rather than a religious identity. However, the ideology is often strongly pro-Hindu and overtly anti-Muslim in practice, although its advocates frequently describe it as a cultural philosophy or "way of life" rather than a strictly religious movement (Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hindutva>).

## PAUSE: THE QUESTION OF WOMEN AND DALIT FARMERS AND THE ROLE OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM

This article interrogates the yearlong farmer's protest in India against the Indian Agricultural Act of 2020, often referred as the Farm Acts, from September 2020 till the repeal of the laws by the central government in November 2021 under pressure from the collective known as Samyukta Kissan Morcha (SKM, roughly translated as Collective Farmers' March) of almost all farmers' organisations and trade unions representing workers from every section of agriculture and allied sectors, especially from the north Indian states of Punjab, Haryana and parts of western Uttar Pradesh that were brought under the auspices of the first large scale experiment in industrialisation of agriculture in India in the 1960s, with the introduction of high yielding variety (HYV) seeds, abundant use of pesticides, mechanised tools and modern irrigation, fondly known as the Green Revolution<sup>4</sup> then, and Green Massacre (Ground Xero, 2023, p. 60) now, due to the ecological disaster that indiscriminate use of pesticides and HYV seeds brought, along with a debt-ridden farming class with the ever increasing cost of highly mechanised, resource intensive production, making agriculture largely unprofitable to small and mid-range farmers.

The article investigates the present farmers' protest to understand the nature of the strike as a political act of dissent and the movement as a sustained and organised process of protest against the neoliberal state. It argues that the farmers' protest is not a spontaneous act or event triggered by the three laws under the Indian Agricultural Act 2020. Rather, it is the result of prolonged and organised efforts of various farmers' unions and unions of allied sectors – particularly in Punjab and Haryana, which could ensure surplus production of food crops by being early adapters of large scale industrialisation of farming propagated by the state in the region – to address the adverse effects of deregulation of the market on agriculture since the 1980s, which was an obvious off-shoot of the Green Revolution. One can therefore argue that it is these sustained and painstaking efforts of the unions to make people aware of government policies over decades that allowed them to bring home the point that the Farm Acts are decisive steps taken by the state towards neoliberalism in farming that will have adverse consequences for almost 86 percent of small and marginal farmers. The acts will pave the way for unbridled corporatisation of agriculture, facilitating gradual deregulation of procurement and pricing of agricultural produce that government presently regulates through

MSP (Bhaduri, 2022, pp. 31-33, 48-49). The laws clearly hint at eventual abolition of the safety net of MSP, thereby resulting in privatisation of public sector units (PSUs) such as Food Corporation of India (FCI), which procures food grains at MSP for the Public Distribution System (PDS) that provides food grains at subsidised rates to a large section of the populace who are under serious economic distress.

The central issue of the farmer's protest is the demand for legal assurance from the government on MSP, as the three laws aiming to deregulate the agricultural market are in direct conflict with MSP. However, according to the Shanta Kumar Committee report of 2015<sup>5</sup>, only six percent of the farmers in India have large enough land holdings and resources for surplus production to sell to the government at MSP. And majority of these farmers are from Punjab and Haryana. Even in these two states, according to the agriculture census 2015/16, only 5.28 percent of the farmers have more than ten hectares (Ground Xero, 2023, p. 93). These pro-government reports met with severe criticisms from the press, national and international (see, for example, articles published in *The Hindu*, *The Frontline*, *Newslandry*, *The Wire*, *Indian Express*, *Al Jazeera*, *BBC* and *CNN*, to name a few)<sup>6</sup>. In other regions of India, the agricultural land use patterns suggest even lesser possibilities for big industrial farming with surplus produce for regulated markets. Thus, one can extrapolate that although the farmers' protest had pan-Indian support of unions and solidarity from the agricultural community, it was limited in terms of mass mobilisation predominantly to Punjab, Haryana and parts of Uttar Pradesh. The guiding principle behind the movement is MSP, which is not the immediate concern of the majority of the farmers in India. So the movement could not resonate with the rest of India at the policy level, and therefore mass mobilisation of farmers from other parts of India was largely absent. While the movement gained considerable support from various sections of Indian society and received international attention, a section of the media in India – referred to by critics as "pro-state" or "Godi media" (lapdog media, a term which has gained momentum in the past ten years, when freedom of press found itself in severe crisis in India) – played a controversial role in framing the protests. These outlets often characterised the protestors negatively and attempted to delegitimise the movement. It presented the strike as based on a local issue instead of a national concern. It propagated the idea that corporatisation of farming would benefit small and marginal farmers who can directly sell their produce to the highest bidder, as MSP had always been the domain of large farmers. Mainstream media such as Republic TV, Times Now,

4 The Green Revolution in India in the 1960s was a major agricultural transformation aiming to address malnutrition in developing nations by significantly boosting crop yields through technological advancements. It was first introduced in Punjab, and later in Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Key innovations included the development of high-yielding varieties (HYVs) of wheat and rice, often called "miracle" seeds, originating from Mexico and the Philippines. This period also saw the widespread use of chemical fertilizers, intensive irrigation, and dwarf wheat varieties that produced more grain without collapsing. While the Green Revolution increased food production, it had several adverse effects, such as reduced biodiversity through the decline of traditional crops such as indigenous rice varieties and millets, environmental damage from overuse of fertilizers and pesticides, and soil degradation due to excessive irrigation. It also exacerbated rural inequalities, benefiting wealthier farmers more than the poor. Today, technological advancements are focusing on reducing waste and limiting carbon emissions, with data-driven tools optimizing planting, irrigation and harvesting (National Library of Medicine, National Center for Biotechnology Information, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7611098/>).

5 "The NSSO's (70<sup>th</sup> round) data for 2012-13 reveals that of all the paddy farmers who reported sale of paddy during July-December 2012, only 13.5 percent [of] farmers sold it to any procurement agency (during January-June 2013), only 16.2 percent farmers sold to any procurement agency. Together, they account for only six percent of total farmers in the country, who have gained from selling wheat and paddy directly to any procurement agency. That diversions of grains from PDS amounted to 46.7 percent in 2011-12 (based on calculations of offtake from central pool and NSSO's (68<sup>th</sup> round) consumption data from PDS, and that country had hugely surplus grain stocks, much above the buffer stock norms, even when cereal inflation was hovering between 8-12 percent in the last few years. This situation existed even after exporting more than 42 MMT of cereals during 2012-13 and 2013-14 combined, which India has presumably never done in its recorded history. What all this indicates is that India has moved far away from the shortages of 1960s, into surplus of cereals in post-2010 period, but somehow the food management system, of which FCI in an integral part, has not been able to deliver on its objectives very efficiently. The benefits of procurement have not gone to larger number of farmers beyond a few states, and leakages in TPDS remain unacceptably high. Needless to say, this necessitates a relook at the very role and functions of FCI within the ambit of overall food management systems, and concerns of food security" (Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution on Recommendations of High Level Committee on Restructuring of FCI, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2015, <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=114860>).

6 For example, "2020: Farmers take the country by storm: It showed how a peaceful and democratic protest could challenge the might of the state" (Frontline, 2022); "Of the dead at protest, 'small farmers' make up big chunk: Marginal farmers, landless too add numbers: study" (Vasudeva, 2021); "Farmers complete 7 months of protest, allege 'undeclared emergency'" (The Hindu, 2021a); "Farm laws: India farmers end protest after government accepts demands" (BBC, 2021). "The three farm laws were never a solution: True agricultural reform rests with local governments, and States need to go back to the basics and expert suggestions" (Narayanan, 2021); "The year the farmers went up against 'Godi' media, and won: And by doing so, the farmers reflected the general public's lack of trust in mainstream media" (Munjal, 2021); "Farmers across India have been protesting for months. Here's why" (Yeung, 2021).

Zee News, Aaj Tak and News18 vilified these farmers and their peaceful protest as “Khalistani separatist”, “anti-nationals”, and so on, to demean the rightful protest. The rampant use of fake news played a big role in the construction of such anti-farmers’ protest narrative. Bhaduri (2022) states in his book, *The Emerging Face of Transformative Politics in India Farmers’ Movement*:

Since the media has a decisive role in propagating the ideology and simulating the war situation, the contradiction becomes deeper. The leader has to encourage modern methods of digital mass communication as a weapon of mass destruction of intelligence and awareness among the people...

...News is not only manufactured but also filtered, through a mostly self-imposed censorship. This requires making as invisible as possible all inconvenient “small” news like unemployment, farmers’ distress, caste, race killings or rape that adversely affects the climate of mobilization for nationalism.

The faking of news is done both by commission and omission. (Bhaduri, 2022, pp. 17-18)

This essay argues that keeping the focus solely on the repeal of three laws by the state, as anti-farmer laws, with concerted effort to gain legal assurance on the continuation of MSP, is a necessary strategy by the SKM to bring all factions of the farmers’ organisations representing large, small and marginal farmers along with other organisations of allied sectors under one common consensus. As Shinder Singh Thandi adds,

The farmer camps grew larger as more and more farmers, encouraged by their organizations in different parts of India, began to join the protest movement. In addition to farmers, other sympathetic individuals, citizen groups and NGOs also joined in, not only socially widening the movement but also prolonging it to annoyance of central government and its supporters in the print, audio and visual media. (Thandi, 2024, p. 7)

The large-scale mobilisation of the agricultural community, braving all odds in the face of relentless state atrocities, the Covid-19 pandemic, farmers’ suicides and martyrdom during the year-long struggle for survival could have been achieved only through reducing class, caste and gender equations to the common denominator of being a peasant fighting not only for survival, but for the right to grow and provide for the citizens of India.

The peasant movement against the Indian Agricultural Act of 2020, with road blocks, rallies, marches, staying, eating and sleeping under the same roof at the protest sites, day in and day out for more than a year, has been etched in collective memory of the nation through hundreds of chronicles in the form of citizen journalism,<sup>7</sup> social media posts, songs, slogans, street plays, demonstrations, and an open stage for people across India, its diaspora, and the larger international community to support and join the movement and show solidarity on the ground and in the virtual world. The counter

narratives woven by the numerous smart phones in myriad new media outlets, intertwined with the traditional methods of mass mobilisation, presented a peoples’ movement voicing dissent and showing unprecedented resilience, resolve and resistance against the robust propaganda machinery of the state. It is in this mediatic tapestry that one can locate the truth and the real achievement of one of the paradigmatic moments of the people’s movement in India in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While pro-state media outlets often portrayed the farmers as terrorists, separatists, or anti-nationals, citizen journalists, through social media platforms, provided ground-level reporting that challenged these biased narratives. Equipped with smartphones and real-time updates from protest sites, ordinary individuals captured and shared authentic footage of the peaceful protests, offering an alternative to the sensationalism pushed by mainstream media. Channels such as Mojo Story and independent journalists such as Mandeep Punia and Ravish Kumar presented unfiltered reports and interviews with farmers, which highlighted their legitimate economic concerns. Moreover, citizen journalists debunked fake news and misinformation by exposing manipulated images and videos, holding Godi media accountable for its distorted coverage. This grassroots-level journalism democratised the flow of information, giving voice to marginalised communities and amplifying the protestors’ demands. The sheer volume and reach of citizen reporting made it impossible for mainstream outlets to control the narrative, showcasing the power of decentralised media in fostering truth and counteracting propaganda. In response to biased portrayals of protestors as terrorists or separatists, citizen journalists used social media platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp to provide real-time, unfiltered coverage of the protests. This grassroots reporting not only kept the Indian diaspora informed, but also attracted global support from international activists, celebrities, and politicians. Independent media portals and focus groups organised deliberative assemblies to recalibrate demands and sustain the movement’s momentum, while sit-ins (*dharna*), encirclements (*gherao*), traffic and rail blockades (*rasta/rail roko*), and public meetings were used to demand accountability. Protest camps became hubs for real-time discussions, with citizen journalists documenting peaceful demonstrations and the state’s repressive measures, such as police batons and water cannons.

In this context, writing about a contemporary event such as the farmers protest is like observing a living organism that is neither under anaesthesia nor long dead. We believe that to undergo a critical intervention in understanding an event like the farmers protest, we have to denounce the elegance of a retrospective study and take the role of a chronicler who is constantly in doubt about whether to be or not to be an active participant, however displaced and distanced their concerns and worlds are from that of the protesters. Is it enough to show solidarity to the farmers? Does it ensure a critical distance and detachment from the event? While debating the methodology of the research for this paper, we have asked ourselves whether it is essential, or rather effective, to harness the power of scientific objectivity. Or can we afford to grapple with the insecurities that come with

<sup>7</sup> See the reports by Participedia (n.d), Monitor Civicus (n.d.) and Iqbal and Alam (2021).

the plausibility of experiential knowledge and the speculative nature of the narratives and counter-narratives that emerge from the immediacy of the event? Amidst the urge to say the last and final word on the event, we realised that to be true to ourselves as witnesses to this piece of history that unfolds in front of us, we must embrace the transitory nature of writing about an event that is well and truly alive like a cornered animal, restless, scared, enraged and unpredictable, ready to snap into action without a moment's notice.

In the present essay, we have decided to take the role of patient bystanders, chance spectators who witness an event in real and reel, live and virtual, to gather our thoughts hastily and present our immediate reflections on the event, shaky and fragmentary like a stuttering stream of video through a sketchy internet connection, resonating with the plethora of ground reportage from the protest sites. This paper categorically restricts its observations and analyses to the immediate developments that marked the event of the first farmers' protest of 2020.

The study is based on the following resources. First, it draws upon the firsthand observations of the event in the central protest sites and observations of the allied protests organised by civil society in different parts of India, especially in the metropolitan centres of Delhi and Kolkata. Second, it gathers insights from the initial reactions of the protesters and the combined leadership of different trade unions regarding the nature of the protests, the methods of mass mobilisation, the coordination of the protest sites, the leadership hierarchy and the dissemination of the information through various platforms through series of unstructured interviews. Third, it explores secondary literature such as collections of interviews by Ground Xero, scholarly works by Thandi (2024), Bhaduri (2022), Kaur (2022), Moliner and Singh (2025). Fourth, it draws on newspaper reports and reportage in the standard electronic and print media as well as coverage via social networks such as YouTube, Facebook and X (formerly known as Twitter). Fifth, we collected recordings, songs, memes and spoofs made by individuals and shared through messaging platforms such as WhatsApp. Finally, publicly available legal documents, policy documents, and press releases were consulted to provide us a point of departure for the present study.

The article argues that the farmers' protest of 2020, in its initial phase, could not gravitate towards a pan-Indian movement due to the lack of sustained mass mobilisation and awareness programs by trade unions and civil societies in the rest of India with an intensity akin to that in Punjab, Haryana, and parts of Uttar Pradesh. It opines that the focal point of the protest for the repeal of three farms acts was a necessary step towards bringing different farmers' organisation under one umbrella, but in the process it not only suspended the more fundamental issues of equality for women and Dalit farmers and the larger workforce in agriculture, but also failed to assimilate the broader questions of unemployment, caste and gender discrimination, as well as economic

inequality brought by crony capitalism. We have observed that the women's and the Dalit questions have taken on new meanings in the context of the farmers' protest. The farmers' protest marked a shift in political rhetoric from the social to the economic. Finally, the paper argues that the narratives of protests have shifted from the traditional modes of dissemination in the neoliberal times through participatory journalism and an emergence of an unregulated public media through smartphones and cheap data plans, facilitated by the project Digital India<sup>8</sup>, which was introduced by the central government in 2015.

This article identifies two phenomena that are symptomatic of the way forward for the peasant struggle to become a national movement spreading across the working class and beyond caste hierarchy in India. The protest saw 80,000 women farmers in yellow *chunris* (scarves) who came and took charge of the protest sites on 18 January 2021 to celebrate Women Farmer's Day and again in large numbers on 8 March 2021, International Working Women's Day. Many women stayed throughout the movement along with their male comrades. They protested the Supreme Court order for women and elderly members of the protest to return home as they believed that they were part of the protest not as wives and daughters of the farmers but as colleagues, who came out of their own free will to fight for their right to till the land. In Punjab, only thirteen percent of women own agricultural land. Even after the ownership of land on paper, they take no decisions on the use of the land and profits of production, which are controlled by the senior male members of the family. The women's right to be independent farmers and labourers has been a long-cherished dream that has come to the forefront after the protest. The acknowledgement of women as farmers is central to the success of the peasant movement in the future.

Throughout the Ground Xero's interviews<sup>9</sup> with union leaders and even notable women leaders such as Harinder Bindu (who has worked substantially with women from marginalised communities in terms of caste, especially Dalit farmers and agricultural labourers) (Ground Xero, 2023, pp. 71-91), the leaders use the sense of the other while discussing the issues of Dalit agricultural workers. Although the leaders are unanimous that Dalits and other marginalised communities should organise themselves, the lack of Dalit and women in the leadership in the present stage of the peasant movement indicates a larger economic and social problem. In this context, Rajinder Singh, the youngest member of the SKM, notes that only 3.5 percent of the land in Punjab is owned by Dalits. They form the largest section of the landless farmers and unorganised agricultural labourers. Although one third of the 165,000 acres of government-controlled land – 55000 acres – should be legally offered to the Dalits (Ground Xero, 2023, pp. 62-65), they are largely deprived. Redistributing ownership of Land to the actual user of the land remained largely overlooked by successive governments in India since independence. The large participation of the Dalit workforce in the present protest gave them visibility and empowerment.

<sup>8</sup> Launched by the Government of India in July 2015, the Digital India initiative aimed to transform the country into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy. The program sought to improve online infrastructure, increase internet connectivity, and promote digital literacy, particularly in rural areas. Key components included the expansion of broadband highways, the establishment of digital services such as e-governance, and the creation of jobs in the IT sector (see <https://csc.gov.in/digitalIndia>).

<sup>9</sup> Ground Xero's book (2023) is a collection of interviews of leaders of the farmers' union, such as Dr Darshan Pal from Krantikari Kisan Union, Harinder Kaur Bindu from Bharatiya Kisan Union (Ekta-Ugrahan), Surjit Singh Phul from Bharatiya Kisan Union (Krantikari), Jasbir Kaur Natt from Punjab Kisan Union, Hannan Mollah from All India Kisan Sabha, Kavitha Kuruganti from Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture, as well as leaders of agricultural and rural worker unions, such as Pargat Singh from Krantikari Pendu Mazdoor Union, Lachhman Sewewala from Punjab Khet Mazdoor Union, and Darshan Nahar, Gurnam Singh and Mahipal from Dehati Mazdoor Sabha, along with journalists such as Hartosh Singh Bal, the political editor of The Caravan, to name a few.

The redistribution of agricultural land and increased participation in decision-making bodies by Dalits and other marginal communities is key to the success of future farmer's movements.

### STOP: THE IMPACT OF THE FARMERS' PROTEST AND ELECTORAL POLITICS

The relative success<sup>10</sup> of the farmer's strike of 2020 as a mass movement may be analysed at two levels. The first is the roles of the trade unions, civil society organisations and mass support created through social media across the pan-Indian populace and expatriate Indians, and the larger global audience in the organisation and sustenance of the protest for more than a year against significant measures taken by the state to crush the strike. The second is the process by which the spontaneous public discontent in the primary sector regarding the farm acts has been assimilated into a larger discourse of loss of livelihood, large scale economic deprivation, the women's question, and redistribution of resources according to caste dynamics in the present political discourse. The sustained work by the farmers' union, however divided along the lines of ideology, caste, community, religion, and regional alliances, has created awareness among farmers regarding the agricultural policies that are steeply in favour of corporatisation of farming (Bhaduri, 2022, pp. 23-33). The adverse reaction of the state to the peaceful protests of the farmers, through its reluctance to address the demands and its indiscriminate use of force to resist the protest march, created widespread discontent among farmers of the region. This dissatisfaction among farmers in Punjab, Haryana and parts of Uttar Pradesh may be witnessed during the election campaign against the incumbent government. The opposition, commonly known as I.N.D.I.A bloc (The Indian National Development Inclusive Alliance), opposing the NDA (National Democratic Alliance) government that has been in power since 2014, has taken up the issue of MSP as one of the central critiques of the ruling coalition. One can extrapolate from the election result in the region that the political mobilisation of the trade unions against the Farm Acts had a direct impact on the electoral politics of these states during the general elections of 2024. The three states prominent in the farmers' protest – Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh – which were earlier the bastion of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) government in the last two terms in 2014 and 2019, saw a significant defeat of BJP in this general election of 2024. BJP could not win any seat in the state of Punjab<sup>11</sup>, and in Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, especially the western part, BJP lost sub-

stantially. In Haryana, BJP lost fifty percent of the seats, whereas in the previous terms it won all ten seats<sup>12</sup>. BJP lost five seats in rural Haryana, which was actively participating in the farmers' protest, and they have also stopped BJP entering their villages during their election campaigns. Similarly in Uttar Pradesh<sup>13</sup>, BJP suffered a huge blow, especially in western Uttar Pradesh, which was actively participating in the farmers' protest. In the 2022 state election, BJP had scored an astounding win across the state, yet that magic fell short after the farmers' protest and the results were clear in 2024 general election. Muzaffarnagar, one of the major sugarcane producing districts in western Uttar Pradesh, witnessed massive defeat of Sanjeev Baliyan, the union minister of BJP by 24672 votes<sup>14</sup>. Another important case in point is Lakhimpur Kheri constituency<sup>15</sup>, where BJP minister Ajay Mishra Teni, who was involved in the SUV ramming row, lost the election by 34 329 votes<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, the BJP lost significantly in Shamli district, Meerut, Agra, Mathura and Aligarh, all from the western parts and having a considerable Jat population, a caste group that participated in the farmers' protest extensively<sup>17</sup>. In 2014 and 2019 respectively, the BJP government got an absolute majority in parliament, but in 2024 it formed its first coalition government as it secured only 240 votes itself while NDA alliances managed to secure 294 seats, where 272 seats are the minimum requirement to form a government<sup>18</sup>.

There has been a concerted effort by pro-state media outlets to discredit the farmer's protest. They have been demonised and termed terrorists and anti-national elements. The widespread support, especially from the Sikh expatriate communities<sup>19</sup>, has been connected by the state to the *Khalistani*<sup>20</sup> insurgency of the past. However, there is a proliferation of counter narratives both in popular and scholarly discourses. It can be observed that civil society, through traditional modes of communication, especially in print and digital forms across the internet, has managed to produce alternative discourses against the well-oiled, anti-farmer propaganda of the state.

All attempts to demonize the protestors and their leaders with various labels, such as Khalistanis, Marxist/Maoists, Urban Naxalites, anti-Nationals, 'tukde-tukde' gangs, pro-Pakistani agents, Chinese or other foreign agents, did not have much success. This attempt at 'Othering' the movement by Modi government's compliant and lap-dog media (Godi media) totally backfired as protestors developed their alternative print and social media channels to present a counter narrative on their grievances and in the process, also succeeding in globalizing the movement. (Thandi, 2024, p. 7)

10 The demands of farmers during the protest in 2020-21 were primarily centred on repealing the three Farm Acts, which were revoked in November 2021. However, the farmers had 12 demands in total, the most prominent being the legal guarantee for an MSP for all crops. Farmers sought the implementation of the Swaminathan Commission's recommendation (<https://prsindia.org/policy/report-summaries/swaminathan-report-national-commission-farmers>), which advocated for MSPs to be at least 50 percent higher than the weighted average cost of production, known as the C2+50% formula. Farmers also urged India to withdraw from the World Trade Organization (WTO) and halt all free trade agreements (FTAs). Other requests included pensions for farmers and farm labourers, compensation and job guarantees for the families of farmers who died during the Delhi protests, the repeal of the Electricity Amendment Bill 2020, and an extension of MGNREGA employment from 100 to 200 days a year with a daily wage of 700 Indian Rupees, linked to agricultural work. The protestors also called for stricter penalties against companies producing fake seeds, pesticides and fertilizers, the creation of a national commission for spices such as chilli and turmeric, and securing the rights of indigenous peoples over water, forests and land. Although the Government of India repealed the Farm Acts, other demands, especially for the MSP, were not addressed, which ensured the reemergence of the protest in February 2024.

11 Out of thirteen seats from Punjab, the Indian National Congress won seven seats, Aam Admi Party won three seats, Shiromani Akali Dal won one seat and two were won by independent candidates, whereas the BJP made no seats in the 2024 general election (<https://results.eci.gov.in/PcResultGenJune2024/partywiseresult-S19.htm>).

12 Out of ten seats, five were won by the BJP and five seats by the Indian National Congress (<https://results.eci.gov.in/PcResultGenJune2024/partywiseresult-S07.htm>).

13 Out of 80 seats, Samajwadi Party won 37 seats, BJP won 33 seats, Indian National Congress won six seats, Rashtriya Lok Dal won two seats, Aazad Samaj Party (Kanshi Ram) won one seat, Apna Dal (Soneylal) won one seat (<https://results.eci.gov.in/PcResultGenJune2024/partywiseresult-S24.htm>).

14 <https://results.eci.gov.in/PcResultGenJune2024/candidateswise-S243.htm>

15 During the farmers' protest in October 2021, Lakhimpur Kheri witnessed a series of violent acts in the form of an SUV hit and run incident, followed by shooting and mob lynching. Minister Teni's son was directly involved in the case.

16 <https://results.eci.gov.in/PcResultGenJune2024/candidateswise-S2428.htm>

17 <https://results.eci.gov.in/PcResultGenJune2024/partywiseresult-S24.htm>

18 See CSDS Lokniti Post Poll Survey 2024 for further details.

19 Mostly people from the Sikh and Punjabi community in Canada, UK and Australia. Canada has the largest Punjabi diaspora outside India.

20 The Khalistan Movement aims to establish Khalistan, an independent Sikh state, by separating the Punjab region from India through a secessionist campaign. Khalistan means "Land of the Pure."

The most significant development catalysed by the farmer's protest of 2020 is a new breed of participatory journalism via YouTube<sup>21</sup>. The widespread coverage of the farmers' protest on YouTube was facilitated by enthusiastic response from the audience. The journalist and commentators gradually became confident of the fact that YouTube may provide an alternative platform for journalists and social commentators who are critical of the state in contrast to the traditional print and electronic news channels. Several videos emerged on the YouTube platform that attempted to engage with the farmers' protest in India from the perspective of the farmers instead of the state propaganda that helped to inform the larger audience of India regarding the impact of the Farm Acts and the reason behind the protest, to organise a support for it amidst the massive amount of derogatory information circulated through mainstream media. These videos have varied scope, such as explaining the laws and their impact, live reporting from the protest site, interviews and sound-bites collected by the protestors and supporters on-site, and analysis by political analysts such as Yogendra Yadav and seasoned journalists such as Ravish Kumar, to name a few. The complex role of social media, especially YouTube, in the present general election, one may argue, has its roots in the dissemination of information and misinformation during the farmers' protests of 2020.

There has been a flood of scholarly works on the farmer's protest in the past couple of years (Bhaduri, 2022; Ground Xero, 2023; Kaur, 2022; Thandi, 2024). They enrich our knowledge of the evolution of peasant movements in India, the relationship between agrarian reforms and the Indian polity, the new forms of political activism, and issues of gender and caste discrimination. It can be argued that the montage of attractions in the spectacular narratives of the farmers' strike foreground the silent labour force of the "women farmer" and the plight of the "Dalit" workforce in the agricultural sector. The substantial participation of women farmers in the strike and their active involvement in the running the movement has established them as a distinct workforce. They are mothers, sisters, daughters, but above all, they are farmers who demanded their right to livelihood. There had been a deep inequality regarding ownership of land and resources among Dalit farmers. The farmer's protest brought to the surface this deep-seated social inequality against the Dalit labour force in the agricultural sector. There is a dire need for large scale land reform to address this fundamental problem. It can be extrapolated that the central issue of reservation to address caste inequality in India during the general election campaign of 2024 to elect the central government, clearly suggests that large Dalit population in agriculture who are the worst affected; however, a voting majority of the nation has the potential to offer an electoral alternative to an ideology backed by crony capitalism and religious polarisation.

## REWIND: AFTERTHOUGHTS

The farmer's protest of 2020 stopped short of being a peasant movement on a national scale for the following reasons. First, in India there are widely different land use patterns, the nature of farmers and agricultural labourers are varied across different geographical regions, the revenue generated from agriculture in

different parts of the country broadly differ in magnitude, demographic patterns change every few hundred miles, and there are distinctive social and economic dynamics across different political entities in the federal structure of Indian democracy. Second, the strong trade union and farmers' organisations in Punjab and Haryana facilitated a mass mobilisation of the labour force associated with agriculture to protest against the government policies. Such organisational prowess could not be replicated in other parts of India. Moreover, the unions are divided on the basis of complex alliances of caste, religion, ideology and resources. It was unprecedented, even in the farmer's strike of 2020, for such a large array of farmers' organisations, predominantly from Punjab and Haryana, to congregate under the banner of SKM and decide on a common set of goals. Third, the mainstream media not only refrained from objective reporting of the event, but it also disseminated false information and actively participated in meticulously constructing the state's propaganda. The news of the protest never reached people on the ground.

The farmer's protest of 2020 has remained a movement of two agriculturally rich regions of north India, namely Punjab and Haryana, in public memory. It would have taken a pan-Indian character, at least visually, if the governments of individual states and the central government were not as prompt at stopping the farmers from other parts of India from reaching the protest site.

*The BJP government in Haryana, with the help from central agencies, tried everything – water cannons, tear gas, shells, concrete barricades, lathi-charges, mass arrests – to stop the march but failed and, if anything, these repressive acts only riled up more farmers in Punjab, Haryana and western UP, Rajasthan and Uttarakhnad and join the protest movement. These marches, unable to proceed further into Delhi, due to erection of massive steel and concrete barricades on the main highways, eventually decided to camp at three borders – Singhu, Tikri and Ghazibad. (Thandi, 2024, p. 7)*

More importantly, the 2020 protest failed to connect the issue of agrarian distress with the larger national concerns of unemployment, inflation, loss of livelihood, economic inequality, and unbridled privatisation of natural resources. However, the narratives of dissent propagated by the opposition against the incumbent government in the general election of 2024 clearly suggest that the political formations in the electoral race to power have picked up from where the farmers' protest ended.

The rise of the silent women workforce to the surface as farmers and agricultural labourers beyond their traditional household image is one of the most significant developments of the protest. Before the strike there was rarely such spectacular representation of this silent force that comprises nearly half, if not more, of the labour in the primary sector. This large work force across caste, religion, class and region can be considered a distinct labour force on the basis of gender. The political forces in the general elections of 2024 could identify that this substantial bank of votes could be unified on the question of economic distress and social security. The farmers' protest allowed the women to be seen as equal in struggle and in profession. It facilitated a re-definition of the women farmers beyond domestic and gendered

<sup>21</sup> Some links include: <https://youtu.be/xMcBDrEFk1c?si=SLsed3jAdAm10n5l>; <https://youtu.be/xMcBDrEFk1c?si=SLsed3jAdAm10n5l>; [https://youtu.be/iHpZV7ro7IU?si=\\_ut-p5S56aE3BH67](https://youtu.be/iHpZV7ro7IU?si=_ut-p5S56aE3BH67); [https://youtu.be/76w6GG1vs1Y?si=3Y6yr3LV48rdFY\\_Y](https://youtu.be/76w6GG1vs1Y?si=3Y6yr3LV48rdFY_Y); [https://youtu.be/lwrDilZMREl?si=LUs2jtHdKw8\\_UuvZ](https://youtu.be/lwrDilZMREl?si=LUs2jtHdKw8_UuvZ).

discourses. The Dalits and the minorities from different religious and tribal communities form a major portion of the underclass in India. They are divided on caste and religious lines that have been exploited by populist politics in India since the 1980s on a large scale. The left political formations, on the other extreme, tend to ignore the caste question and focus their energy solely on class hierarchy, and often fail to address or simply deny the importance or existence of the question of caste and its relevance in the larger socio-political and socio-economic contexts in India. The farmers' protest has clearly stated that the large section of the Dalits who form a major part of a vote bank divided across caste allegiances and religious affiliations continue to be at the margins of economic prosperity. A step towards equality can happen only through major policy changes such as land reforms and reservation of jobs<sup>22</sup>. The present political discourse during the parliamentary elections of 2024 may have found the right chord, or rather the appropriate rhetoric, to bridge the marginality of the Dalits in terms of caste and class, and their majority in the electoral representation.

The phenomena of strikes, protests, mass mobilisation and political activism in the neoliberal world will increasingly construct public perception in the virtual world, predominantly on social media platforms through smart phones and algorithmic architecture facilitated by ever faster internet carrying larger data loads. It will become increasingly hard to distinguish real from fake news. And discourses will rise and fall, losing their way in the maze of rabid targeted information. A sizeable portion of activists of the virtual world rarely end up on the streets to demand real action. The struggle for the voices of dissidence and protest of the future is to bring the apparently anonymous numbers on the web out in the open. The activity of protest and strike remain a humane activity to be fought as fellow humans. However, the modes of representing, chronicling, and expressing dissidence and protest have found new mediums with their own strengths and weaknesses. In the history of mass protests, methods of production and dissemination of discourse have changed over time, but the struggle for truth and compassion for fellow comrades has remained constant. Recent farmers' protests in Europe, Africa and Latin America might have numerous differences in the mode and nature of protests and their demands, but they all tend to focus on raising a voice against the urban bias in the governance of the agricultural sectors. However, one notable difference is that other political protests in India and abroad have allegiance to political parties, and often the leadership of the movement is controlled and governed by the leaders of political parties. The farmers' protest in India in 2020-21 marks a significant departure from this trajectory and it was led by farmers (landowners and landless farmers), other agricultural workers and their trade unions – who may have political affiliations, but those connections were not invoked to create the mobilisation towards the farmers' protest in 2020 and 2021; instead, it was focused on their demands, and in order to do this, farmers understood that they need to be united. The leaders of the farmers' protest travelled across India and met farmers from different parts of India to organise the mobilisation against the three Farm

Acts and also the negative propaganda of mainstream media. They put across their side of the story against these defamatory propagations through modes of *Khaps* and *Mahapanchayat*<sup>23</sup>, and they asked the people not to vote for or give allegiance to a certain political party or ideology; instead they asked them not to vote for BJP and to stop the privatisation of agricultural sector:

The government's high-handed arrogance did not know how to cope with this form of non-violent protest which is capable of continuing indefinitely! The thirty-six plus farmers' unions which acted as the central coordinating body, each had different memberships, ideologies, regional cultures and affiliations. And yet, they spoke in one voice and acted as one body. It is the only case we know where democratic centralism was really democratic and centralism was voluntary. Its proof is the amazing spontaneity of the movement. They also used the traditional *Khaps* and *Mahapanchayats* to organise on a massive scale which was only possible by breaking consciously the barriers of class, caste, religion and gender. Village organisations are traditional, but their use to break oppressive and divisive customs was indeed unique.

...To bring about transformative changes without part politics of money, propaganda and authoritarianism from the top is certainly the most worthwhile political experiment in any modern democracy. (Bhaduri, 2022, p. 13)

The farmers' movement exemplifies how grassroots organising can challenge dominant power structures and the social norms that presume that only through social media can one reach the maximum number of people in shortest period of time, without relying on top-down political authority or financial influence. This bottom-up, non-violent form of resistance, which broke through barriers of class, caste, religion, and gender, is made possible through face-to-face interaction and active participation of people from all background in all levels of the protest, from planning to executing it in action, is truly transformative in its reach and impact. The enduring power of such movements reflects the resilience of democratic spirit, as the struggle for justice continues to evolve with time. Screens change, the film roll crawls into a cassette and then onto some corner of a drive, the image still moves frame by frame, second per second. The show goes on ■

22 In India, job reservation, or affirmative action, is part of a broader social policy aiming to address historical injustices and systemic inequalities faced by marginalized communities, particularly the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Enshrined in the Indian constitution, job reservations allocate a percentage of government jobs and educational opportunities to these groups to promote social mobility and economic empowerment. However, the system has been a point of contention, with critics arguing it perpetuates divisions and others viewing it as essential to bridging the caste-based economic disparity. Although intended to uplift disadvantaged communities, its implementation is often seen as insufficient to fully redress the socio-economic marginalization of groups such as Dalits, especially in private sector employment, which remains largely unregulated by reservation policies.

23 These fall under local self-government in India, which is an example of democratic decentralisation through participatory modes of self-governance at the grassroots level, where the planning, decision-making and election of the representatives are done directly by the people through active participation in public meetings held on a regular basis in Gram Sabha, *Khaps* and *Mahapanchayat*.



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