The Farmers Protests in India

Sanhati collective
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Indian Politics
Indian Politics in One Slide

- The rightwing Hindu Nationalist party: BJP
  (in power since 2014. Prime Minister Modi)

- The Indian National Congress (INC)

- Numerous smaller regional parties

- The Communist Parties

- Communists outside electoral realm
Indian fascism

(1) New synergy capital-state-non-state (*)
(2) Hindu Supremacism
   (a) Religion, caste base of power
   (b) Form of violence: masculine militancy. [Pogroms (Delhi 2019)]
   (c) Institutional consolidation: state, judiciary, army, and police

(3) Imperial desires
   - Northeast
   - Kashmir
What led to the protests?
Political History (1947-2020) with an emphasis on agriculture

- Demand: land to the tiller. Limited land reforms in 1947
- Power with big bourgeoisie, upper castes
- Growing consolidation of kulaks/big farmers.
- Deep penetration of neoliberal capital since 1990
- INC, BJP, electoral Communist Parties – all complicit
- Major communist insurgencies in the 1940s, 1970s. Brutally suppressed. (*2)
Capitalism and Indian Agriculture

-1960s: ‘Green Revolution’
  Capital-intensive, mechanized
  Small farmers driven out, pauperized
  Increased productivity, depletion
  Brutal repression of farmers movements

-1990s to 2014: Onset of India's neoliberal era
  Ongoing ‘2nd Green Revolution’

- 2014–2020:
  Public food distribution, welfare gutted

Goal: Corporations will control production of food, agri-market, and retail.

Rationalize agriculture to meet market needs

Convert Indian agriculture into capital and input-intensive type, ripe for depredations of neoliberalism
Dynamics of Farmers Oppression

- Impoverished peasantry:
  - Small holdings with insufficient yield, debt trap

- Shrinking landholding: dispossession and alienation. Reduced gap between medium/small/large farmers reducing

- Productivity gradually decreased, soil depletion

- Input costs increased: privatization of seeds, pesticide

- Huge internal migration: between farm and wage work

- Nominal protections from the State

- Symptoms: rampant drug problems in Punjab, suicides among farmers

artist: Chittaprosad
Interlocking Axes of Oppression

- Class (continued primitive accumulation)

- Social relations of production: tribal, gender, caste, religion based allocation of means
  - landholding: % share in land
    - Hindus
    - Tribals
    - Dalits
    - Muslims
    (in all categories, women own far less than men)

- margins of exploitation
- access to rural credit, livestock (caste prescribed subservience)
- mobility & access to transportation (gendered)
- patron-client systems (caste based state/credit networks)
- shared agricultural knowledge networks
The Indian Farm Laws of 2020

(1) Remove minimum price

(2) Remove agricultural markets (*mandis*)

(3) Remove anti-hoarding laws

The goal is the Walmart-ization of the agriculture sector.
The Movement
The Protests

300,000 farmers, 50 unions. Key demands

- Minimum price guaranteed
- No hoarding
- Support for agricultural markets
- Continued subsidies in electricity tariffs
- Women demand: loan write-offs, suspension of debt recovery, revocation of new labour laws employment guarantees

- August 2020 – now
  - November: spread to other states
  - December: workers, dairy farmers, women’s rights groups, cultural activists and transporters joined. Strikes, protests, reinforcements
  - Jan (26th): Long march with tractors
  - Failed negotiations, state repression and efforts to break the movement

Important question: How did a large population, highly differentiated along class, caste, and gender lines, come together to fight the impending neoliberal reforms?
The shape of the movement: militancy, solidarity, fragility

- Normalizing women in political spaces:
  - Mainly landless, farm workers, wage workers
  - Organizers & leaders rather than audience

- Care work in the picket lines

- Solidarities across class (landholding)
  - Against market volatility
  - For state protection
  - People move seasonally between farm work and wage work [construction, etc]

- Biggest farmers union BKU able to incorporate demands of landless laborers as well

- Careful work in caste solidarity by Jat and Dalit unions over many years has led to this moment
  - 2004: landed Jat union expressed caste solidarity by making tea and washing utensils of landless Dalits during a landless labor union struggle. Important moment.
  - 2010: landed Jat union stood beside landless Dalit laborers during grab by power plant
  - 2015: landed agitated to have landless Dalit laborers included in government support after failed cotton
Whither Protests?

- Against Walmart-ization of agriculture
- Solidarities across gender, class, caste
- Serious challenge to Indian Right
Extra slides
The shape of the movement: continued

- Peculiarity of Punjab/Haryana farmers vs others:
  - Militancy
  - Large farmers: sustaining long term struggle, ability to take on state
  - International support

- Bittersweet fragilities: Historical grievances have to be addressed.
  - Large farmers benefited from Green Revolution
  - variously landed farmers: Sikh Jats
  - older unions pitted landed Jats against landless Dalits
  - Patriarchal societies
Extra slides
Political Progression (1947-2020)

- Limited land reforms in 1947
- Power with big bourgeoisie, upper castes
- Nominally secular, non-aligned government
- Deep penetration of neoliberal capital since 1990
- INC, BJP, electoral Communists - all complicit
- Major communist insurgencies in the 1940s, 1970s. Brutally suppressed.

Interlocking Axes of Oppression

- class (primitive accumulation)
- social relations of production: tribal, gender, caste, religion based allocation of means
  - landholding [73.2% women farmers own 12.8% land, 89% muslims landless, 33.8% tribals alienated]
  - margins of exploitation
  - access to rural credit, livestock
  - mobility & access to transportation
  - patron-client systems
  - shared agricultural knowledge networks
  - caste prescribed subservience & debt servicing
- Alienation: nation state integration (territorial annexation under military Kashmir, Northeast, etc.)
The Farmers Protests: Emergent solidarities

- Differentiation among marginal, medium, large farmers
- Landless laborers
- Farm labourers and small farmers move seasonally between agricultural work and wage work [construction]
- Large farmers benefited from Green Revolution

- Agrarian crisis:
  - Productivity gradually decreased, soil depletion
  - Input costs increased: privatization of seeds, pesticide
  - Shrinking landholding

- Medium/small/large farmers also slowly became alienated from agriculture
- Rampant drug problems in Northern India, suicides among farmers.

- Biggest farmers union BKU: able to incorporate demands of landless laborers as well
- The class conflict among the landed and landless has been rendered secondary in the face of the bigger threat: multinationals behemoths which will impoverished all.
The Farmers Protests: Gender Perspectives

Then the sheer meticulousness of the organisation needed to carry on such a protest for weeks on end...

The fact that women and men were comfortably staying together,
sleeping side by side, and these are people from states like Haryana and UP we are talking about,
the fact that there is no gendered division of labour and both men and women were making chapattis
with equal zeal, the heartiness of the protestors, the almost carnival like atmosphere and so many other factors.
The agrarian landscape:

- Landholdings have become smaller reducing class polarization between farmers
  - Sale
  - Division within family
  - Agrarian crisis resulting in people leaving farming for wage work

- Why Minimum Support Price?
  - offers protection against market volatility
  - more acutely felt among farmers that produce cash crops like soybean, wheat, sugar etc
  - Offers small farmers protection
  - Disparate state protection and highly extractive market conditions in central, eastern and southern states
(*1) Nature of (Indian and other) capital/State and relation between the two

What is the new anti-fascism? What are the new forms of Left consolidation.

(*2) The fate/development of the non-electoral Left (Operation Green Hunt)
August 2020: Protests begin in several states

Time Magazine reports that in August 2020, protests against new agriculture laws proposed by Prime Minister Modi began in several states including Punjab and Haryana. These protests were organized with assistance from the All India Kisan Sangharsh coordination committee, the body that is also responsible for the current Delhi protest.

AFP // Getty Images
September 2020: The Farmers’ Produce Trade and Commission Act passes

This all leads us to September 2020, when Prime Minister Modi passed the new Farmers’ Produce Trade and Commission Act. According to the government, this act grants farmers more freedoms by dismantling the APMC and allowing them to sell their crops to anyone for any price. The country’s farmers disagree, arguing that it actually leaves them more vulnerable than ever before, as it allows major corporations to drive down the cost of certain crops. It’s important to note that the act was crafted and proposed without any input from India’s farming community.
Early November 2020: Farmers begin burning fields

Before any official marches began moving toward Delhi, farmers around the country demonstrated their anger with the new laws by **burning their fields**. Usually, the farmers would hand clear any leftover crop residue, but in early November, in response to the Farmer’s Produce Trade and Commission Act, as well as another government ordinance that would prosecute farmers for any pollution they caused, the workers chose (en masse) to burn the residue instead.

*ARCHANA THIYAGARAJAN // Getty Images*
Nov. 23, 2020: Protesters march towards Delhi

During the week of Nov. 23, 2020, protesters from around India began marching towards Delhi, the country’s capital. When they began arriving at the edge of the city on Nov. 26, the protesters were met by large groups of police who used tear gas, water cannons, and physical force to keep them from entering.

*AFP // Getty Images*
Nov. 26, 2020: The world’s biggest strike

On Nov. 26, **250 million workers** in a range of industries from banking, to transportation, to telecommunication services, to oil and natural gas production, went on strike in what is believed to be the world’s largest coordinated strike effort of all time. The millions of people were standing in solidarity with farmers, as well as in protest of several other proposed labor laws, including the dismantling of protective labor laws and a lack of increase in the minimum wage.

*Hindustan Times // Getty Images*
The following day, Nov. 27, after news and images of clashes reached international news outlets, the government announced that protesters would be granted peaceful access to Delhi after all. Initially confined to an approved protest site that would be monitored by police, protesters quickly spread out, taking over streets and highways with their presence.

MONEY SHARMA // Getty Images
Dec. 1, 2020: Bilkis Dadi is arrested

The protests made international headlines again on Dec. 1, when police arrested Bilkis Dadi, an 82-year-old woman who’d risen to fame for her devoted protests against the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act. Bilkis Dadi had been marching in solidarity with the farmers when police stopped her at a border point between states and returned her to her home.

_Hindustan Times // Getty Images_
Also on Dec. 1, government officials met with protest leaders for the first time. Although no conclusion was reached, both sides agreed that the talks had been “good.” The two sides met again on Dec. 3 and 5, though, to date, no official conclusions have been reached.

SAJJAD HUSSAIN // Getty Images
Dec. 5, 2020: Solidarity protest in the Bay Area

Support for the farmer’s protest has extended across the world. On Saturday, Dec. 5, protesters rallied in the Bay Area, marching from Oakland to San Francisco and back in an effort to show solidarity with their Indian family members and colleagues. The following day, on Dec. 6, thousands of protesters descended on the Indian High Commission in London in a coordinated effort to protest the law change.

*Hindustan Times // Getty Images*
Things effectively came to a head in regards to the ongoing strike, when thousands of protesters shut down public transportation, shops, and markets around the country. The 450 farmers unions and organizations that support the strike say that the move is not meant to upend the life of ordinary citizens, but to put pressure on a government that’s slow to respond.

RAKASH SINGH // Getty Images
Dec. 8, 2020: The government detains opposition leaders

On the same day, government officials acting under direct orders from Prime Minister Modi reportedly detained leaders of the opposition. Several of these leaders, including Arvind Kejriwal, the chief minister of Delhi who opposes the new act, and other union heads, told The New York Times that they’d been stopped from joining the growing protests by the police.

_Hindustan Times // Getty Images_
Beginning of 2021

Several protesters and organizers have told news outlets that they have no plans to cease the protests anytime soon, saying they’ll stick out the long winter and increased COVID-19 risk as this is a “matter of life and death.” It remains to be seen how things will play out, but many are hopeful the ongoing negotiations between opposition leaders and government officials will lead to an acceptable compromise. Mekhala Krishnamurthy, a senior fellow at the Centre for Policy Research, simplified the issue when he told Time Magazine, “[these] protests and the negotiations are the beginning of a process that should have started at the beginning.”
Umbrella of all the unions: Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM)

Darshan Pal Singh

(1) Kisan Majdoor Sangarsh Committee led by Satnam Singh Pannu: CPIM

The Kisan Mazdoor Sangharsh Committee (KMSC), which has a considerable hold in Punjab’s Majha region and some districts of Malwa and Doaba regions, has been under fire for choosing Delhi’s Outer Ring Road to conduct its tractor march on Republic Day.

(2) Krantikari Kisan Union leader Darshan Pal Singh

(3) Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) President Balbir Singh Rajewal.

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Shivkumar Kakkaji Sharma
Shiv Kumar Sharma, nicknamed Kakkaji, is an angry farmer leader who has been railing against the government for the last several years. The-65 years-old farmer-activist has been associated with an RSS backed
farmer outfit, sacked after his repeated attacks on the BJP-led government in the state, and by his own admission, jailed 44 times. He started out as a student activist back in 1971. It was in Jabalpur University where he studied from 1971 to 1977 as a law student, doing MA LLB where he dabbled in activism, first by holding protests for farmers' rights and later providing them legal assistance pro bono.

Baldev Singh Nihalgarh
He began with CPI’s youth wing, AIYF, and later became one of the frontline farmer leaders of Punjab. He is part of Kul Hind Kisan Sabha.

Hannan Mollah
Hannan Mollah was a Member of the Parliament between 1980 and 2009. He has all along represented the constituency Uluberia in Howrah district of West Bengal. He won the seat eight times in a row and lost to Sultan Ahmed of the Trinamool Congress in the 2009 election. Mollah is a member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). He is currently a member of the Central Secretariat of the party. He is also the General Secretary of the All India Kisan Sabha and a Joint Secretary of the All India Agricultural Workers' Union.
Jagmohan Singh Patiala

Singh is a marginal farmer who used to work in the cooperative department of the Punjab government. He was an activist of the Bharatiya Kisan Union Ekta before a break-up 15 years ago led to the emergence of the Bharti Kisan Union Ekta (Dakaunda), which he now serves as general secretary.

Buta Singh Burj Gill

Gill has been working among farmers since 1984 and was among leaders who gheraoed Punjab Raj Bhawan for several days in 1984. He was earlier part of BKU (Ekta-Sidhupur) faction, which suffered a split in 2006.

Balbir Singh Rajewal

Rajewal is a well-known figure in Punjab. He has headed his faction of the BKU since he broke away from the original outfit in the 1990s. He is credited with having drafted the constitution of the BKU. He has prepared the demand charter for this protest.
Darshan Pal
Pal is the president of Krantikari Kisan Union Punjab, which has been working for farm loan waivers for several years. He is also among the farmer leaders who have played a vital role in bringing the 31 organisations together for the agitation, and now plays the role of coordinator for this grouping.

Satnam Singh Pannu
He is the president of the Kisan Mazdoor Sangharsh Committee, Punjab. He was among those who refused to ease the Rail Roko protests even when the other farmers agreed to do so after talks with Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh.

Bogh Singh Mansa
Bogh Singh, now president of the BKU, has been working on issues related to farmers for the last 42 years and got involved in activism in his student days as a coordinating member of the Punjab Students’ Union.

Bhupinder Singh Longowal
The 35-year-old is the state convener of the Kirti Kisan Union youth wing. Longowal and his team of youngsters are considered single-handedly responsible for getting rural youth involved in this agitation. Longowal is a postgraduate in political science and was a member of the Punjab Students’ Union and the Naujawan Bharat Sabha, a Left organisation dating back to pre-Independence days, before joining the Kirti Kisan Union.
Gurnam Singh Chaduni
Known for his unique ways of protesting (like throwing potatoes on the state highway), farmer leader Gurnam Singh Chaduni, is one of the first to have started mobilising farmers against the newly passed farm laws. He is also the chief of BKU. An FIR has been lodged against him in Karnal for allegedly instructing farmers to break all barricades.

Mahinder Singh
Singh has 18 cases against him in connection with farmer protests such as rail roko, jail bharo. He has been a farm activist for 23 years along with being a farmer.

Surjeet Singh Phool
Part of the BKU (Krantikari), Phool was booked under UAPA by Punjab government in 2009 when he was accused of being linked to Maoists and placed under “intensive interrogation” in jail in Amritsar. Farmers’ unions had got together in protest to demand his release.

Ruldu Singh Mansa
Mansa is founder-leader and president of All India Kisan Mahasabha.

Major Singh Punnawal
Punnawal is part of All India Kisan Sabha.
Nirbhay Singh Dudhike
Dudhike came to political forefront during an agitation against killing of two students in police firing in Moga in 1972. He was associated with Tarimala Nagi Reddy’s Unity Centre of Communist Revolutionaries of India-Marxist Leninist (UCCRI-ML).